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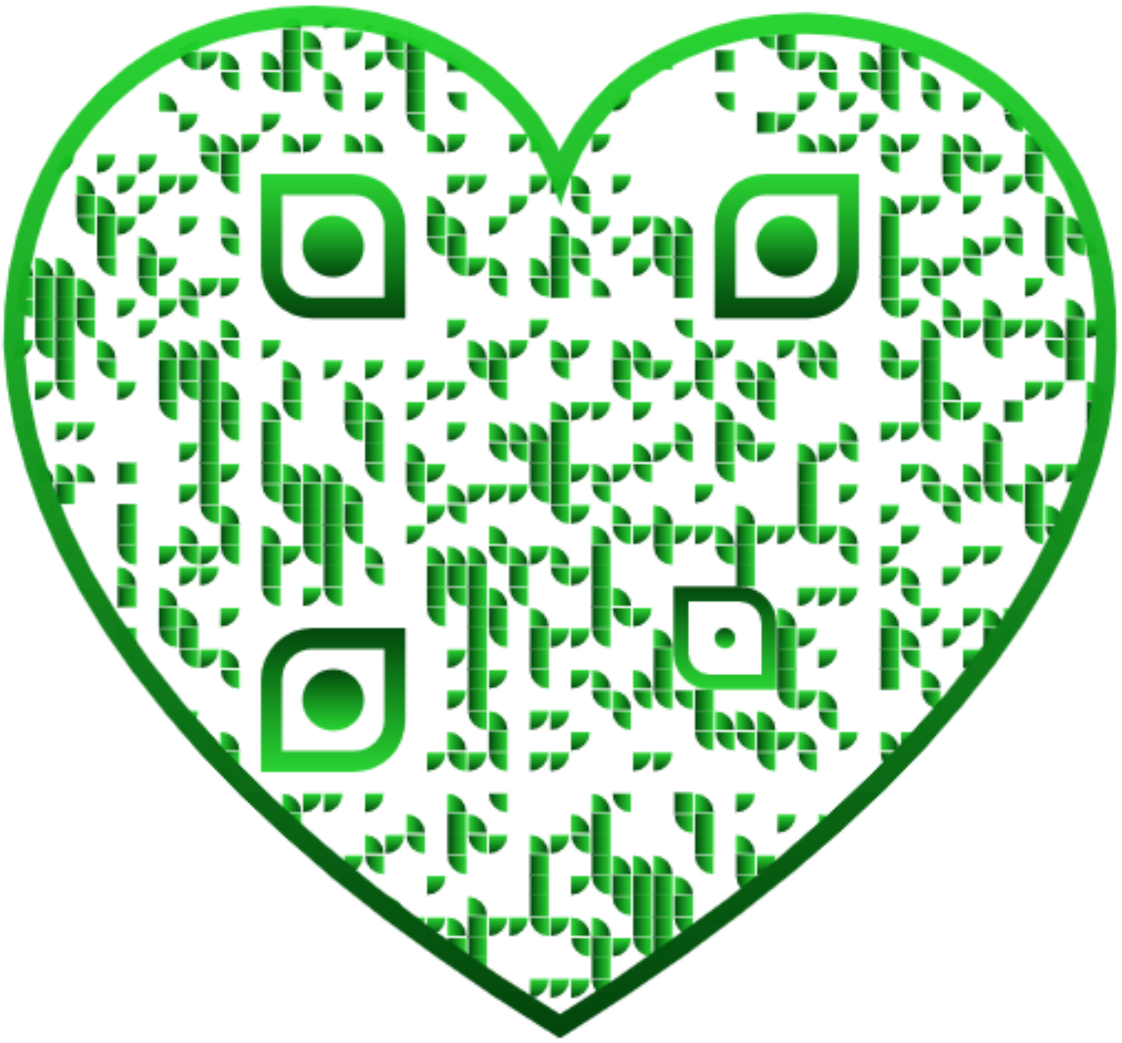

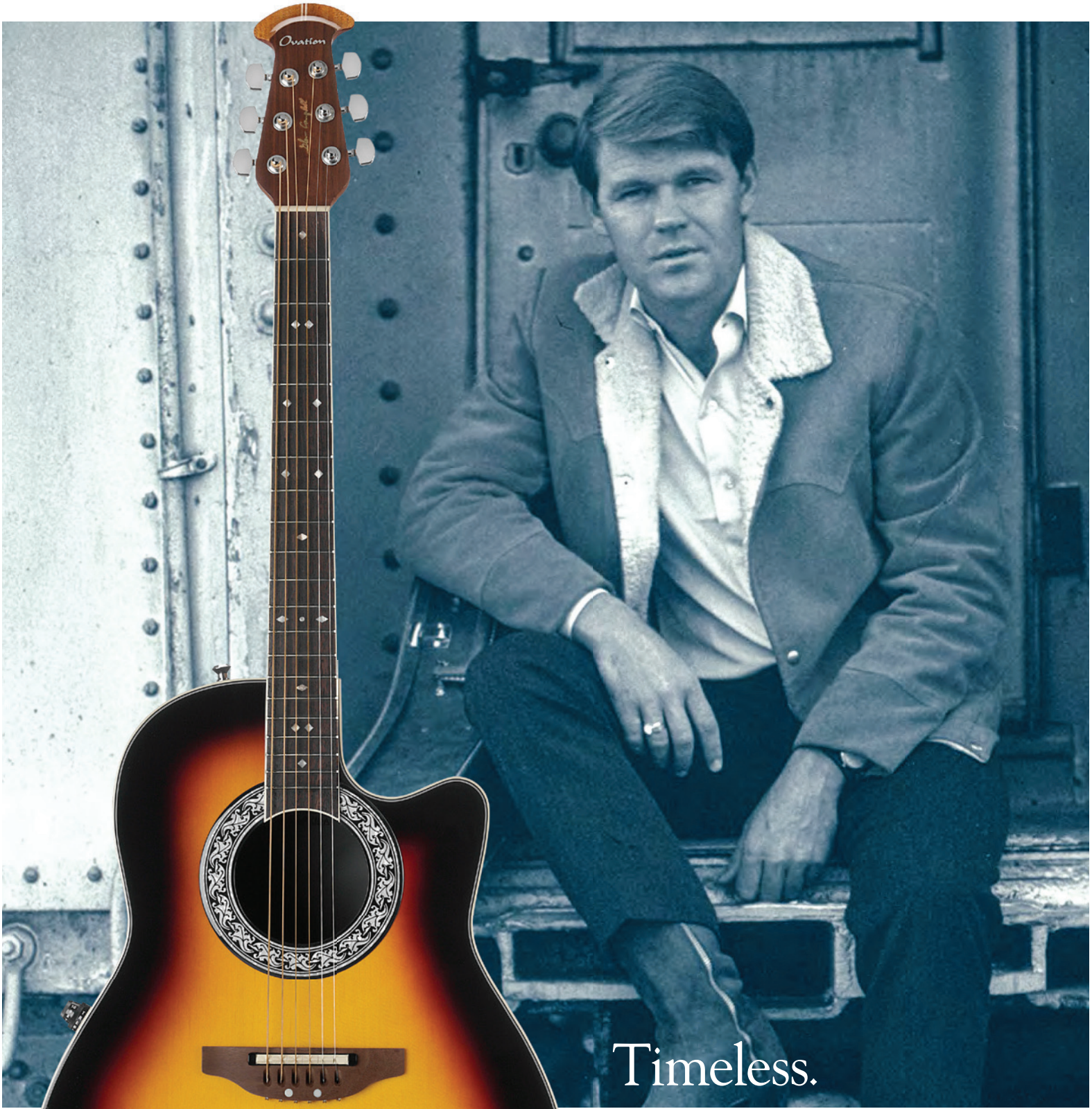

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Eskimo Callboy at E-Werk Cologne, Germany. Pic by Christian Ripkens.

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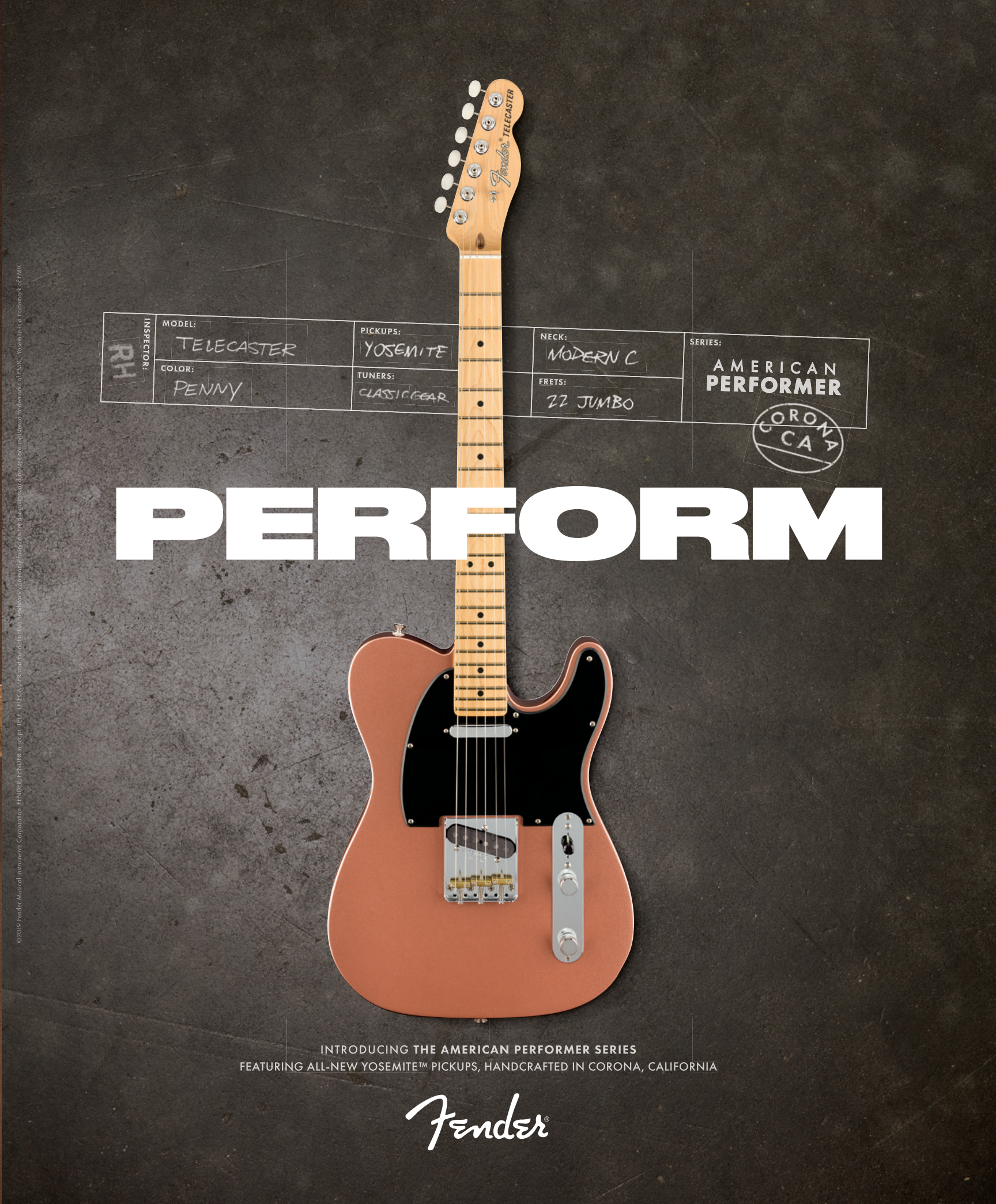

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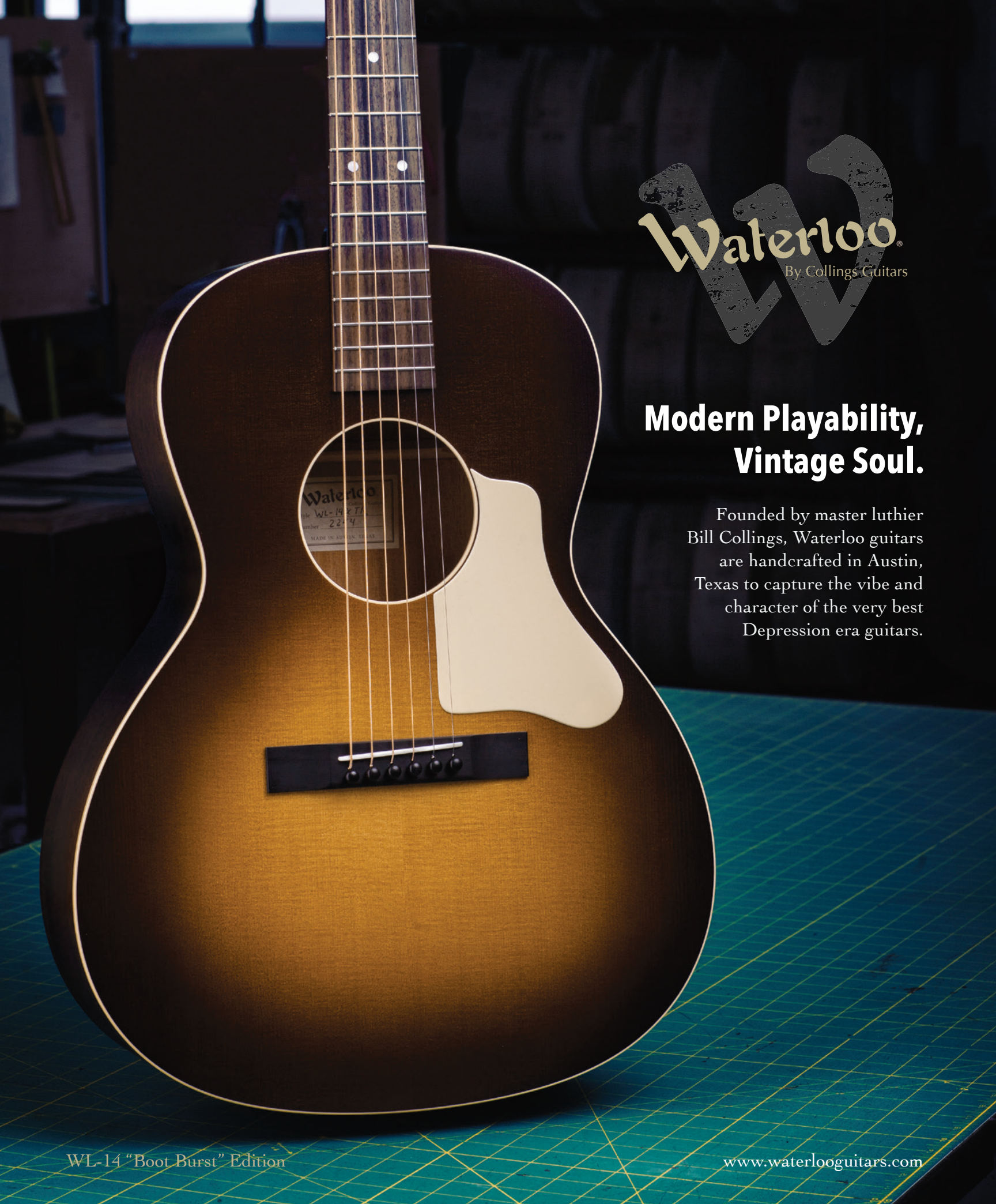
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Finding "The One"

BY SHAWN HAMMOND

Chief Content Officer
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The fact that you're reading this means you've surrendered unconditionally and irretrievably to the guitar. It may have happened a couple of months ago or decades in the past. Either way, as corny/cringey as it sounds, we all know that we fell for this thing not just because it's responsible for some of the coolest, most moving sounds in all of live and recorded music history, but because it's also still a potent symbol of individualism, cathartic self-expression, and, yeah, even rebellion. Sure, its awesomeness has been sullied here and there by unfortunate incidents (Adam Levine at the Super Bowl, cough cough), but that sort of thing is inevitable.

Anyway, a natural side effect of this infatuation—especially in the current golden age of killer affordable gear—is that it's incredibly easy to fall into the habit of wanting basically one of every iconic guitar and amp out there (or maybe an expensive widget that does the digital near-equivalent).

But I submit that this is a surefire way to spin your wheels and prolong—or maybe even prevent—the discovery of your own voice. What you should be looking for is "the one." Not the one killer Strat, *and* the one amazing Tele, *and* the one Les Paul to rule them all, et al. ad nauseam. I'm talking about the one guitar and amp that best channels the sounds in your head.

Okay, okay. I'll grant that there are a couple of important caveats to be made here: First, finding the instrument that best comports with your inner voice is a journey that involves trying a lot of different types of guitars and amps. And sometimes once you've found the right guitar or amp, you still find that fine-tuning things like pickups, tubes, picks, or strings will get you closer and closer to *your* sound. But don't forget that that's what it should be about. And yeah, we all (hopefully) evolve over time, too, so that complicates the voyage as well. I'm not saying this is easy or simple.

What I am saying though—to be blunt—is that it really is a vain, consumer-mentality trap (or perhaps just a subconscious copout?) to think it's necessary to amass a collection of iconic gear similar to what your pantheon of 6-string heroes uses. Since the dawn of guitar, the most interesting and influential players have typically used one or two basic guitar and amp types as the foundation for the bulk of their repertoire. Name a famous guitarist or bassist, and you'll see the pattern, with pretty minimal divergences.

Why is this? Perhaps it's because the more time they spent with their preferred gear, the more it became so much more than a tool—it became ingrained in their musical being. The more they played it, the more the mental lines between flesh and nickel-wrapped steel blurred ... the more fluid and quick to respond were the neural paths guiding the interplay between individual and instrument. This level of intimate familiarity is born of untold hours of exploration and bonding, not by obsessive fetishizing of noise-making baubles. Donning a different instrument just because you think the variety of shapes and finishes will bolster your credibility or look killer with your new leather pantalones is a fool's errand.

Pedals are a slightly different story, in my opinion, but even there the same basic principle holds true: Spend innumerable hours getting to know your gear inside and out, and more often than not it'll meld with your musical psyche and respond to playing subtleties and nuances in ways that cohere into a singular sound that's far more impactful and, well, *you*, than constantly swapping in new circuits that make it harder to predict how your rig will respond.

Of course, in the end there are no rules. That's what's so great about music—or the best music, at least. I'm sure there's a healthy counterargument to be made, too. But I still contend that it's worthwhile food for thought whenever you find your paycheck burning a hole in your pocket despite that wall full of neglected axes and cabs (or those drawers full of stomps). Sometimes recommitting to your existing rig is the less-exciting but more fulfilling secret to a stronger musical future.

> ***It really is a vain, consumer-mentality trap to think it's necessary to amass a collection of iconic gear similar to what your pantheon of 6-string heroes uses."***

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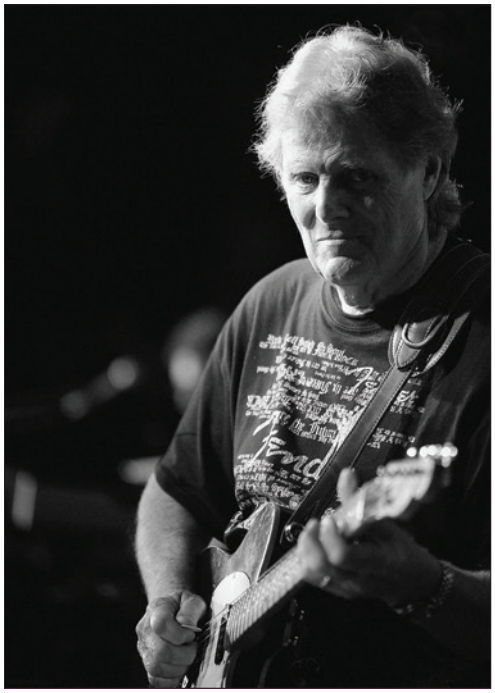

Remembering Reggie

A guest of a friend, I once passed Reggie ["Reggie Young: 1936–2019," January 2019] in the hallways of a Nashville studio. I quietly mentioned to my buddy, "Hey, was that Reggie Young that just walked by?" Reggie quickly spun around, introduced himself, and told me to follow him. We arrived at an isolation room where he walked me through his setup and handed me a '50s-era Strat that I knew was super-special to him. Keep in mind, I was a complete stranger and no one famous or "near famous." On his break from recording, he was happy to share old stories and just be kind. Listening to the tracks he was laying down that day, they weren't filled with over-the-top fiery licks, although he was more than capable. His intros, fills, and solos were "soul-filled" and hummable. The kind of "music"—not "licks"—that sticks with you. What a wonderful musician and fine gentleman.

—John DeVoke

Meeting the Man

I enjoyed your cover story "Life on the Edge of a Knife" about Portuguese luthier Adriano Sergio [February 2019]. The guitar on the cover was so exquisite and artful that I had to meet the man who crafted it. This is us at NAMM 2019. Adriano was very personable and eager to describe his work—a true master. Thanks for profiling such a cool guy.

—German Robledo

Jim Dunlop's Legacy

I just opened the email that had the story about the passing of Mr. Dunlop ["Jim Dunlop Sr.: 1936–2019," February 2019]. I reached in my shirt pocket and counted them: 10 Dunlop picks. There's always some, no matter what I'm doing. Working, jogging, playing. What more can I say? He'll be missed.

—Willard Steele

Sad to hear that Jim Dunlop has passed away. Interestingly I was thinking of him just two days ago as I watched a documentary on YouTube about the Cry Baby wah pedal. It's sad that he's passed away. For anyone who might be interested, watch the Cry Baby wah documentary. My condolences to his family and friends. R.I.P. Jim.

—JL1989

VIA PREMIERGUITAR.COM

People vastly underrate the importance of the guitar pick. Dunlop picks are one of the very, very few brands I can actually use; most others I simply cannot play with or hold on to. Without Dunlop picks, I wouldn't be playing, and loving, guitar today ... simple as that. R.I.P. Jim and thank you.

—John

VIA PREMIERGUITAR.COM

Correction

In his March 2019 Tuning Up, "The Soul of Laura," *PG*'s Shawn Hammond inadvertently neglected to mention that guitarist Viktor Lager joined Division of Laura Lee during the recording of the band's 2013 album, *Tree*, while longtime guitarist David Fransson departed in 2017.

Playing slowly is harder than shredding for sure. Every hiccup is obvious when you play slow.

—@DaveWestGuitar

I could listen to @EmmaRuthRundle talk gear all day on @premierguitar Rig Rundown and I'm a drummer 😍😍😍

—@BGrooveAudio

I would ask Mr. @pauljacksonjr if he would like to adopt me. (I don't eat much.)

—@artwitto

It's fun how everyone in the ~~peanut gallery~~ comments section has a petty witty remark, and yet none of them are out on tour or being featured in PG *right now. Good job, guys! Just keep at it, and maybe someday soon you'll have people posting asshole comments on the* PG *Facebook page about you, too!!*

—Saoirse McKinnon

Keep those comments coming!

Please send your suggestions, gripes, comments, and good words directly to ***info@premierguitar.com***

Far left: Photo by Lester Cohen

ALBUM SPOTLIGHT

Writhing Squares

Out of the Ether

The Writhing Squares' new LP is a head-bludgeoning shovelful of *The Stooges*-level primitivism and it thrillingly explodes the notion of what such primitivism should sound like—using a skeletal band construct (overdriven-to-fuzzy bass, sax, flute, drum machine) to create a private little space-rock cosmos lit by the spirits of basement psychedelic alchemists like Madrigal and Michael Yonkers.

Sometimes there's a whiff of *First Issue*-era Public Image Ltd, with Daniel Provenzano standing in for Jah Wobble's bass, Robert Quine's guitar, and John Lydon's nitrous-echo vox all at once. It's also easy to hear the throbbing economy of early dub. Kevin Nickles' processed flutes add doses of U.K. pastoral prog. And the convergence of sax and bass filth conjures thoughts of a parallel-universe *Fun House*.

It's killer for warding off a truck-stop-coffee crash at 4 a.m.—a trance-y saccharine rush of squalid and transcendent cosmic rock, minus the overt psychedelic trappings.

—Charles Saufley

Must-hear track: *"A Whole New Jupiter"*

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Photo by Ken Susi

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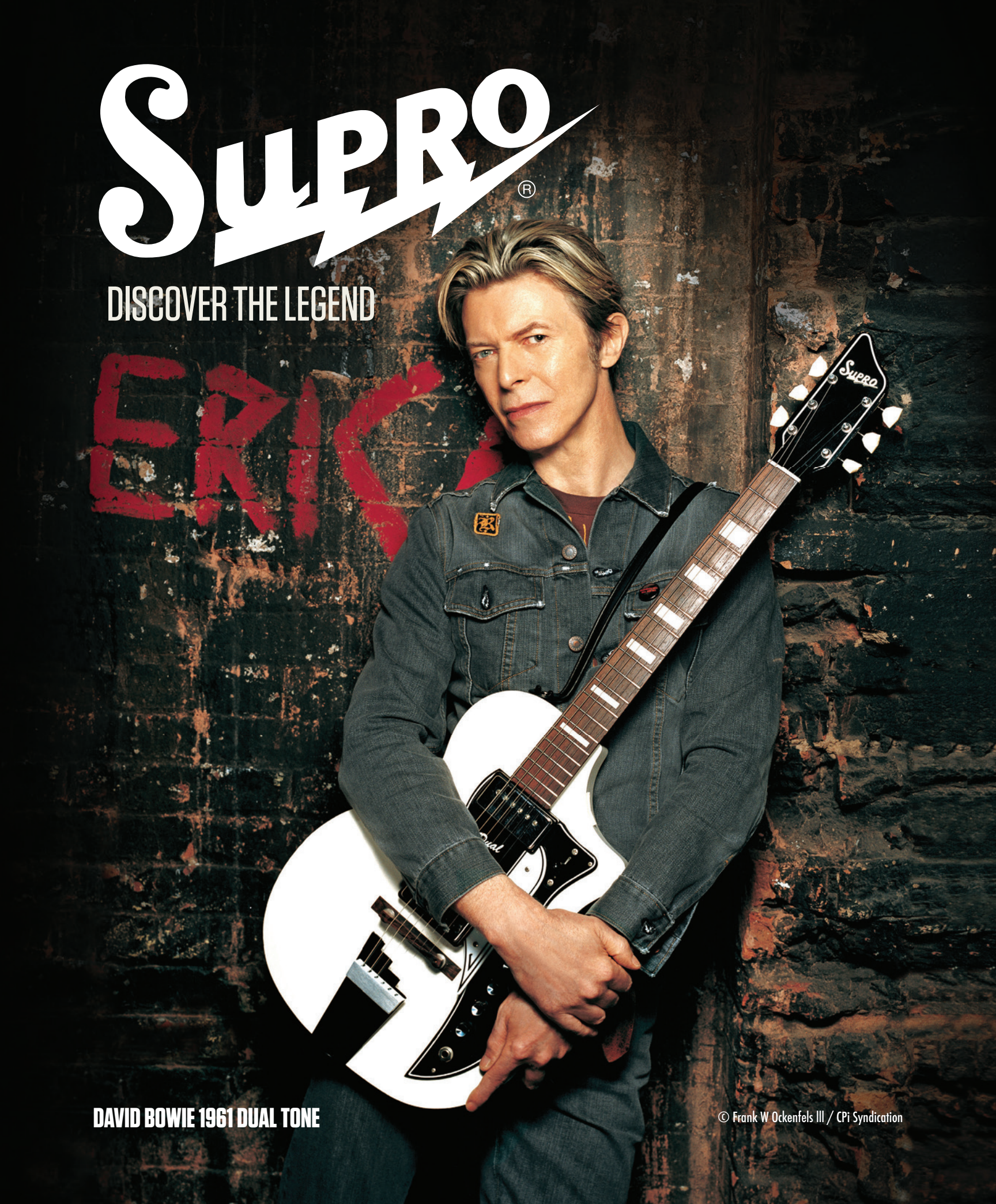
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Below: Photo by Joshua Guerra

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Integratron and Innovation

Unidentified flying objects, conspiracy theorists, defying gravity, and post-Cold War fear come together in the California desert. This was the backdrop for avant-garde guitarist **Elliott Sharp** as he made the score for Jonathan Berman's documentary ***Calling All Earthlings***, which explores how in the 1950s, George Van Tassel used Nikola Tesla's research and alien intelligence to build a time machine called the Integratron near Joshua Tree and the Mojave.

Sounds like a perfect task for Sharp, who's been a pivotal figure in the NYC experimental music scene since the 1980s. Pushing the boundaries of jazz, blues, and rock further and further out, Sharp has often brought complex mathematical theory into his musical processes. We interviewed the prolific, innovative Sharp about this album, and his latest solo album *Studio Venezia*.

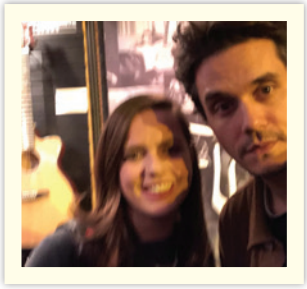
NEW!

PG JAMS WITH ADRIAN LEGG

British fingerstyle master **Adrian Legg** recently rolled through the *Premier Guitar* offices to talk shop and play some tunes. His fiercely unique style combines oddball tunings, a knack for changing those tunings on the fly, and an incredibly dry and funny sense of humor. In this edition of ***PG Jams***, he talks about how he stumbled upon a few gear-related revelations, his electro/acoustic pedalboard, and his struggle for the perfect amplified acoustic tone. Zip over to our website now to see him in action.

Left: Photo by Andreas Sterzing

INSTAGRAM LAND



Guess what @johnmayer isn't good at? Taking selfies that's it!
—@maryspender

Bit overkill! Rehearsals with Schiller.
—@scottmckeon33

I had this crazy dream that I died and went to guitar Hell. Oh crap IT WASN'T A DREAM!!! @stevevaihimself
—@scottianthrax

Reader Guitar of the Month

Name: Steve Webb
Location: Finland
Guitar: Greenie

I'm 66 and have spent 48 years behind a Strat. I've still got my 1963 bought in 1967 for £90, serial number L00231.

This is my new main squeeze, Greenie. l had a desire for a long time to have a scalloped fretboard. I first saw one on an ES-335 owned by John McLaughlin, which must've been around 1978. I have four Strats but didn't want to take a chance, so l bought a neck and body and then started filing. The scallops are mainly on the treble side, but move deeper above the 5th fret. The first idea was to make a gold blingy stage guitar, so l sprayed the body, but the store-bought paint ... well, it wasn't gold! It was more like baby caca, so then l decided to do a two-tone and put on the green. Wow! Worse!

I was going to respray it to neutral black, but there's a guy around here who tends to copy whatever l do to my guitars. He's a great player but very competitive. l thought, "Hmm green ... not a popular color—he'll never copy this!" So, l finished the paint, found a scratch plate that worked, and loaded it with some Fender Custom Shop pickups l had lying around, intending to put humbuckers in later. The frets were very rough, but l took it out on a gig and, wow, it worked!

Then off she went to my go-to fret guy and he refretted it, put on a graphite nut and my favorite string savers, set her up, and l've been playing this guitar ever since. l do about 200 gigs a year at any old bar. The scallops make the higher fretting much more clear and accurate. This may not be for everyone, but since l got hooked, I've done a scallop on my Japanese 1980 Squier, my Epiphone Les Paul, and my Ibanez acoustic. I love your magazine and often pick up new ideas from your lessons and articles about musicians' stage setups. It's a never-ending quest regarding stage setups! Big hugs all around.

Send your guitar story to submissions@premierguitar.com

OPENING NOTES

Brandon "Taz" Niederauer

December 22, 2018
Garcia's at the Capitol Theatre
Port Chester, NY
Photo by John Wisdom

The teenage guitar wizard makes magic with a D'Angelico Deluxe Brandon Niederauer Atlantic, his Seymour Duncan-equipped signature model with a DA-59 in the neck and an Antiquity in the bridge. "It easily covers everything from funky, quacky rhythm tones to epic, warm sustain with a flick of the toggle switch," Niederauer says.

OPENING NOTES

Margaret Glaspy

January 24, 2019
Royale
Boston, MA
Photo by Tim Bugbee

The indie folk slinger finds the zone on her 2014 Tele-style Danocaster, which is modeled after a late-'50s/early-'60s Fender and is outfitted with a pair of Ron Ellis pickups (a 52 in the bridge and Mid-Tall in the neck) in its ultralight swamp-ash body.

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OPENING NOTES

Marty Friedman

February 1, 2019
Come and Take It Live
Austin, TX
Photo by Joshua Guerra

The metal virtuoso lets loose on his new Marty Friedman MF-1 from Jackson, which features EMG Marty Friedman humbuckers. "Jackson worked very hard to give me as much rich, true, ringing pitch as possible on all frets," Friedman says. "It can be the difference between just playing licks and actually making the guitar sing."

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JIM DUNLOP SR.

| 1936-2019 |

BY DAVE HUNTER

Too many in the musical-instrument industry, Jim Dunlop Sr.—whose passing February 6 was widely noted online—was the crowned king of guitar accessories. Over the course of his long career, his eponymous company's vast selection of everything from capos to picks and pedals became one of the best-known in the industry. Whatever the brand on your guitar or amplifier, chances are you have used a Jim Dunlop accessory at one time or another—and often without giving it much thought, so ubiquitous was his enterprise's presence in the guitar universe.

In fact, it's not a stretch to say Dunlop's work and diligence in pursuing improvements in the less-vaunted corners of the guitar industry likely impacted just about every player who picked up the instrument from the early '70s onward. It was these countless unsung advances in form and function that constituted his real reward from the work he loved, and this passion for the trade was bestowed to his son, Jimmy. "When I meet people and they say, 'What do you do for a living?'" Jimmy told *PG*'s Chris Burgess in 2008, "when I tell them I make guitar picks, they kind of give me that blank stare, but I equate what I do with making paintbrushes for artists. I'm like the guy that made Leonardo Da Vinci's paintbrush. You know what I mean? I have the opportunity to work with the greatest guitar players of our time."

Jim Dunlop Sr. was born in Scotland in 1936 and remained a proud Scot throughout his life. Trained as a processing and chemical engineer—and a keen guitarist in his spare time—the elder Dunlop was already working on guitar-related accessories while employed in Glasgow as an apprentice to the inventor of the first hip replacement. He founded his part-time business, the Jim Dunlop Company (later Dunlop Manufacturing, Inc.), in 1965 while still holding that job, then emigrated to Canada shortly after. Following a brief stint in Ottawa, though, he decided to abandon the Canadian cold for sunny California. "I got a postcard from a friend of mine," Dunlop recalled for the history section of his company's website. "It had a picture of a bikini-clad lady and said it was 90 degrees in Muscle Beach. It was 12 degrees below in Ottawa. I decided I'm getting the hell out of here. So we packed up. My wife was seven months pregnant at the time."

In California, Dunlop landed a job as a machinist with Dymo Industries, where he remained until 1972, all the while inventing and manufacturing guitar accessories on the side. After a less-than-successful effort at inventing a new guitar tuner, he invented and marketed first the Model 1100, then the Model 1400 capos—the so-called "trigger" or "toggle" capos still popular to this day—which so many guitarists found to be a vast improvement upon the traditional elastic-strap capos.

After being asked to manufacture a rendition of the out-of-production National thumbpick, he went on to patent a design for fingerpicks with a curved cuticle. He manufactured them in six gauges before moving on to tackle flatpicks—the unassuming yet essential accessory for which he remains best known. In short, Dunlop decided to give a lot more respect—and attention—to this thin slice of synthetic material that represents most artists' point of contact between flesh and string.

As Dunlop told NAMM's Oral History project in 2009, "At that time [guitar picks] weren't very well organized, in respect that you more or less had light, medium, and heavy. And I thought, 'Why don't we make 'em and give people a choice?' The nylon set was six different gauges, and we color-coded them, and changed the sizes to millimeter sizes. So that took off quite well. One of my biggest thrills is when a really good guitar player enjoys a product that we make. As an example, the Jazz III … I've really become overwhelmed at the success of that particular pick. It's been copied left, right, and center. A lot of people swear by it, and my son [Jimmy Dunlop] has actually improved it. He put a different grip on it, and it's a great pick now!"

The success of his pick endeavors enabled Dunlop to move to working at his own venture full-time in 1972, and from there he achieved success upon success. The long list of artists who use, or have used, Dunlop picks includes Billy Gibbons, Joe Bonamassa, Carlos Santana, Jerry Garcia, Kirk Hammett, Slash, Jerry Cantrell, and hordes of others—to the extent that it might take less space to simply list the artists who *don't* use Dunlop picks. And while many of the company's most significant developments involved further

Photo courtesy of Dunlop Manufacturing

The late Jim Dunlop Sr. presents blues icon Stevie Ray Vaughan with a rare gold-plated Cry Baby Wah.

improvements to the materials and processes from which and by which its picks were made—including developing the popular Tortex, Delrin, Ultex, and Primetone lines through the years—Dunlop's advance into the accessories market expanded in several other directions, as well.

After manufacturing steel slide bars for Ernie Ball, Dunlop purchased an out-of-business glass-slide (aka bottleneck) manufacturing company and fast became a leader in that realm, while also moving into other necessities such as care and maintenance products, as well as guitar straps. Along the way, he also pioneered strap *locks*. An even bigger boom was just over the horizon, however: The world's most popular effect pedal fell out of production in the 1980s, and Dunlop took up the call.

Always on the lookout for ways to expand his business, Dunlop heard that the legendary Cry Baby wah pedal had become unavailable, tracked down the owners of the defunct brand, and brought it into the Dunlop Manufacturing family. "It changed the whole direction of the company," son Jimmy relates on jimdunlop.com. "It was very uncharacteristic of the products that we were working with at the time. You've got this guy who was a machinist, who made accessories like slides and picks and capos, and he just jumped right into the number-one-selling electronics product of all time."

The move into electronics paved the way for acquiring other effects brands, including many classics that otherwise would have gone the way of the dodo. In the years since, several iconic MXR pedals, multiple variations of the Uni-Vibe, Fuzz Face, and Echoplex, a range of Jimi Hendrix pedals licensed from the Hendrix family, and a number of Way Huge favorites have joined the fold. All the while, Dunlop Sr. continued to live by, and revel in, the most humble of achievements—from, say, the improved grip offered by a new pick's textured surface to the unveiling of an artist's signature slide.

Anyone who encountered Dunlop at his NAMM Show appearances or dealt with him over guitar-industry matters knew him to possess a rare and admirable blend of the businesslike and the personable. He treated every query seriously, without ever taking himself too seriously in the process. He was a guy who made stuff, and he always attempted to make it the best it could be, but that never once landed a chip on his shoulder.

Ultimately, Jim Dunlop Sr.'s genius lay in his ability to identify subtle, incremental improvements in the less-glamorous products that fulfilled the essential everyday needs of guitarists—and he produced exponential leaps forward for the artform in the process.

Photo courtesy of Dunlop Manufacturing

TOM MORELLO

Click here to watch this Rig Rundown now.

GUITARS

Top left: The guitar that's probably most associated with Tom Morello has to be his Frankensteined "Arm the Homeless" "super strat" that he's had since 1986. The final conglomeration of parts have been in place for 30 years and includes a set of EMG pickups, a knock-off graphite Kramer neck scooped up from the bargain bin at Nadine's Music, and an Ibanez Edge trem/bridge.

Top right: Here's another longtime mainstay of Morello's—a run-of-the-mill 1982 Fender Telecaster coined "Sendero Luminoso." He wanted to start writing/performing songs in drop-D tuning, but all of his other guitars at the time had a locking nut, so he traded with a former roommate for the Tele and Morello had to part ways with a 50-watt Marshall.

Left: When it's time for Morello to cover Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land" or dig back into the Nightwatchman (his acoustic troubadour alter ego) catalog for "The Garden of Gethsemane," he grabs this Ibanez GA60SCE-14-01.

AMPS

All of Morello's gear was stolen after a Valentine's Day gig back in the '80s and he had to scramble to replace everything before an upcoming session. He went to his neighborhood shop to buy anything they had, and what they did have was this Marshall JCM800 2205 50-watt head.

EFFECTS

Morello doesn't change his gear much and his pedalboard is no exception. It includes an MXR Phase 90, two Boss DD-3 Digital Delays (one longer for solos and one tighter for rhythms), an original DigiTech WH-1 Whammy, Dunlop GCB95 Cry Baby wah, and the DigiTech Space Station XP300. Everything runs off the Voodoo Lab Pedal Power 2 Plus and relies on two Boss TU-3 Chromatic Tuners (acoustic and electric).

BUY THE GEAR ›

STEVEN WILSON

GUITARS

Top: The raw sound of a Telecaster plugged straight into an amp has become a signature tone for Steven Wilson's recent project. To capture that tone, Wilson used his Fender 1963 Relic Telecaster built by the Custom Shop.

Bottom: Wilson's oldest PRS is "Blue," his Custom 22 that he keeps in drop-D tuning. "Blue" has had the pickups changed to DiMarzio PAFs.

Click here to watch this Rig Rundown now.

AMPS

Wilson runs a two-amp setup. One side of his sound comes from this Hughes & Kettner TubeMeister 5. It's a 1x8 combo that's maxed out and miked up.

Middle: For the past 15 years, Wilson has been using Bad Cat amps for his crunch tones. This Bad Cat Lynx is a 50-watt head that feeds a Bad Cat 4x12 cab. A Bad Cat Unleash attenuator is in the mix so Wilson can control the volume from his board.

EFFECTS

Bottom: The centerpiece of Wilson's pedalboard is a GigRig G2 Switching System, which makes sense since GigRig guru Daniel Steinhardt wired the board up (and made many of its pedal selections himself). Wilson's array of pedals includes a Boss FL-500 volume pedal, a Source Audio Programmable EQ, a GigRig A/B/Y box, a Dunlop Cry Baby Wah, a TC Electronic PolyTune, a custom GigRig bank selector, an Option 5 Destination Rotation, a Selah Quartz, a Strymon TimeLine and BigSky, two Electro-Harmonix POGs, a Diamond Analog Vibrato, a Moog MF Trem, an Analog Man Prince of Tone, an Amptweaker TightRock Jr., an Origin Effects Cali76, an EHX Small Stone, and a wealth of GigRig power accessories.

BUY THE GEAR

Silvertone

Silvertone

1960s Silvertone 1446L

BY DAN ORKIN

There are a lot of ways in which lower-end department store guitars of the 1960s differ from the top-shelf fare usually featured in this column. Collector interest is not nearly as deep or cemented, and the pool of historical information available about these guitars is far less robust. As a result, the original model names or numerical designations used by Harmony, Kay, Silvertone, and other such brands are often obscure, leaving guitarists to rely on the name of an associated player to identify certain models. For example, that angular-looking red Airline used to be known as the J.B. Hutto Airline, and is now called the Jack White Airline. There's a Teisco that's often called the Hound Dog Taylor model. And then, there's the guitar that's perhaps today's best-known example from the pages of the Sears catalog: the Silvertone 1446L, also known as the Chris Isaak guitar.

Isaak's association with this instrument goes back decades—mostly stemming from a famous promotional image of him holding one in the mid '80s. But Isaak is far from this model's only fan, and there are a few specific details that place the 1446L near the top of the heap of sought-after Harmony-built guitars. For one, the pickups. These mini-humbuckers—with their split pole pieces and distinctly shaped bezels—were designed by Seth Lover, built by Gibson, and are only found on this exact model. It also sports a Bigsby tremolo system, and not the flimsier contraption found on the lower-end Silvertone electrics. Then, most obviously, this guitar just looks *extremely* cool.

The 1446L was originally a replacement for the similarly tuxedoed Espanada model, which, while lacking the Gibson and Bigbsy parts, remains one of the other most sought-after '60s Silvertones. While pricing for both models seems to have cooled off a bit over the past year or two, examples in excellent condition can still command more than $1,500. That's more than 10 times the price you would have found the 1446L listed for in a mid-'60s Sears catalog. Although there are usually a healthy amount of these floating around the pages of Reverb, many extant examples carry neck breaks or cracks and, in the worse cases, are missing those original mini-hums. Guitars with these sorts of conditional issues can sell for as low as $600.

Our featured 1446L comes from River City Guitars of Spokane, Washington, and was listed with an asking price of $1,599. Everything on this one is original and, save for a few honest bits of wear here and there, it's in fine condition all around. That price certainly reflects this and is very much in line with recent sales for 1446Ls without any swapped parts or structural imperfections.

Sources consulted for this article include *Harmony: The People's Guitar, 1945-1975* by Ron Rothman and the silvertoneworld.net fansite.

DAN ORKIN *is content director at music gear marketplace Reverb.com, where he reviews the thousands of listings posted daily to the site and manages the Reverb Price Guide.*

Opposite page:
(Left) Looking refined in its tuxedo finish, this Silvertone 1446L is still stock after more than a half-century, including its Seth Lover-made humbuckers and Bigsby vibrato arm.

(Top right) The appointments of a classic 1446L are in place: the mini-humbuckers with split pole pieces and distinctive bezels, the Bigsby arm, a mod-looking white pickguard, and the lower-bout toggle.

(Bottom right) That distinctive Silvertone headstock is as much a part of American guitar history as Fender's or Gibson's neck toppers, either rekindling visions of players' first guitars or a lineage that runs especially deep in roots music and primal rock 'n' roll.

G&L HG-2

BY ZACHARY FJESTAD

ZACHARY R. FJESTAD
is a freelance writer who specializes in guitars and amplifiers including the history behind them and their current value. Fjestad has been evaluating and appraising guitars for over 20 years. For more information, email Zachary at zacharyfjestad@hotmail.com.

Only about 100 of G&L's short-lived HG-2 were made. The model features an offset maple body, a bolt-on maple neck, and the company's Saddle-Lock bridge and MFD humbuckers.

Q: *Zach,*
I received this guitar in 1989 as a birthday present from my dad, who traded his Honda motorcycle for the guitar and a Marshall amplifier. I have had it ever since, and play it regularly. I know there were not many of these made, so they have at least some limited collectors' appeal, but I wonder if it is actually worth anything? The guitar is all-original, with typical scuffs and scratches that a teenager would inflict. It has a date stamp on the neck, of June 21, 1984, and on the body, of March 1, 1984. It's small, light, and easy to play, which is why I have kept it around. What do you think?
Thanks,
Robert in Apex, North Carolina

A: Nice guitar and great story. Dads can be the coolest, right? In reference to the guitar being "small, light, and easy to play," that doesn't surprise me since Leo Fender was a pioneer in the electric guitar industry and he obviously knew what he was doing. That said, legend has it that Leo never learned how to play guitar.

In 1965, Fender sold his enormously successful company to CBS due to health concerns, and signed a 10-year non-compete clause as part of the deal. Leo's health improved and he consulted for Fender after the company's sale, but he largely remained out of the guitar business until the mid 1970s, when his non-compete clause concluded.

Along with longtime friend and associate George Fullerton, Leo started CLF Research in 1975 and began building instruments for Music Man (another company started by ex-Fender employees). The relationship between CLF and Music Man eventually went south, however, and CLF stopped building guitars for them in late 1979.

In 1979, Fender, Fullerton, and Dale Hyatt (another longtime Fender associate) started a new guitar company called G&L. G&L stands for George and Leo. Fender served as president and provided the designs and technical insight, Fullerton ran production, and Hyatt oversaw management and sales. Until Fender's passing in 1991, G&L produced approximately 27,000 guitars with monthly production not reaching more than 800 instruments. It was during this time that Fender took his guitar innovation to another level and patented several new designs. As Fender was famously quoted in G&L literature, "G&L guitars and basses are the best instruments I have ever made."

The HG series consisted of the HG-1 (one pickup) and the HG-2 (two pickups), and were only produced in 1983 and 1984. So, the date stamps on your guitar coincide with production dates. It's estimated that just over 100 total HG models were ever produced, with less than five of them being single-pickup HG-1s. The HG series guitars were similar to the more common SC series guitars, but featured G&L's Magnetic Field Design (MFD) humbucker pickups. The MFDs utilized a ceramic bar magnet with soft iron poles, rather than the more traditional alnico magnet.

The HG-2 features an offset maple body with double cutaways, a bolt-on maple neck, a 22-fret maple fretboard, six-on-one-side tuners, and G&L's Saddle-Lock bridge (vibrato optional). The two MFD humbuckers are governed by a volume knob, a tone knob, and a pickup switch mounted on a half-moon shaped panel. The HG-2 was available in various colors, though it's unknown how many different colors exist.

Based on G&L's 11-year production of around 27,000 instruments, the HG series guitars made up about a 1/3 of a percent of all G&Ls built during Fender's tenure. In other words, it's a rare instrument, and G&L guitars from this era are quite collectible overall. Today your HG-2 is worth between $1,750 and $2,000, in very good condition as described. This value is also based on your guitar being all-original. Hopefully you'll keep it that way no matter how much you play it!

After Fender's death, his wife passed G&L on to John C. McLaren of BBE Sound, and they continue to build G&L guitars in the U.S. and overseas for their Tribute Series import line. I don't know enough about motorcycle values to determine if your dad got a good deal or got swindled, but, in my opinion, you got a piece of history and a great guitar to play for years to come. Hopefully your dad never regretted his decision!

Sources for this article include researcher/historian H.L. Garrett and *G&L: Leo's Legacy* by Paul Bechtoldt.

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Le Mystère des Guitares Bulgares

BY FRANK MEYERS

FRANK MEYERS *is the author of* The History of Japanese Electric Guitars *and runs the website DrowninginGuitars.com. He has been collecting and repairing guitars for 30 years and is primarily interested in unique, eclectic gear and shedding light on the people and history that contribute to our love of music and guitars.*

When researching guitars, I often discover amazing things. Sometimes I learn about tireless factory workers or innovative designers ... or even yogurt! Yeah, that's right, this month I learned that Bulgaria is home to some of the best-known yogurt in the world. Bulgarians often attribute their good health to their yogurt, which has some sort of bacteria that's only known to exist in the country. I could go on and on with Bulgarian facts, but instead I'll riff about the "state" guitars produced there during the Communist era.

Sometime during the late '60s, many then-Communist countries started to produce electric guitars—instruments for the "people." One of the brands to emerge from Bulgaria was Orfeus, which was called Orpheus for export. These guitars were made in the town of Plovdiv at a furniture factory, which explains why the wood quality and finishes are rather decent. Take, for example, the 335-style Hebros model in **Photo 1**. At the time, Western instruments were almost impossible to find in Bulgaria, and this Hebros electric looks like it was copied from a Gibson photo. The top and back are completely flat and feature some sort of local Balkan ply, which is also used for a core running down the center.

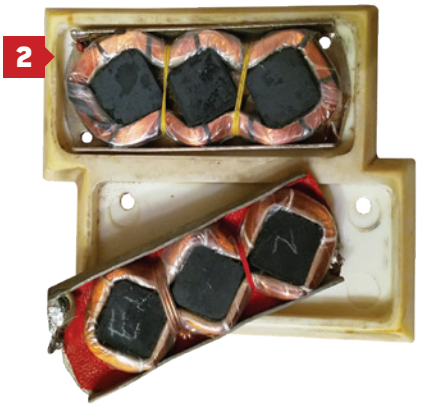
Because the builders probably didn't have much experience designing guitars, playing this Hebros is quite a ride. For starters, it has a chunky neck with an extreme fretboard radius. The tuners are okay, but the tremolo feels like you're working some old piece of farm equipment. All indications point to an early-'70s production date for this Bulgarian oddball.

The pickups are super funky—both sonically and in their design. When I first heard them, they sounded thin, but after I checked out all the cold solder joints and pots (which appear to have come straight out of a vintage radio), I was able to improve the tone a bit. The pickups definitely have a mellow, vintage sound that lacks attack and sustain, but could conceivably work well in the right musical context.

But if you take apart an Orpheus pickup ... OMG! With candy-like magnets nestled in cloth-covered copper windings (**Photo 2**), you could be staring at a little package of premium chocolates. Definitely the most adorable pickups I've ever seen.

Also available in bass and 12-string versions, Orpheus guitars featured a variety of pickup combinations and some really wild finishes (**Photo 3**). Apparently, these were the most basic offerings from Orpheus, and thus the most common on the used market. Orpheus guitars, as well as others made in Bulgaria, fascinate me because so little is known about who built them. If you feel like exploring a surreal path, search out vintage Bulgarian guitars for design inspiration—some of the later models were really gonzo.

A huge shout out to Linas Pečiūra for his fine photos.



Photos by Linas Pečiūra

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21 TONE TREASURES

*PG scopes out the most eye- and ear-grabbing new guitar toys from the **Winter NAMM show** held in Anaheim, California, January 24–27, 2019.*

BY THE PREMIER GUITAR STAFF

Look for this icon to click and watch a video demo.

Electric Guitars

FENDER
Alternate Reality Meteora HH

Last year Fender unveiled an interesting new body shape in the form of the limited-edition Parallel Universe-series Meteora—a solid-body with an unlikely mix of Tele electronics and Jazzmaster/Jaguar styling. However, if either the seeming incongruence or the $2,100 price tag were off-putting to you then, you'll be stoked to see that the company's 2019 Meteora HH (part of the Alternate Reality limited run) revisits both aspects. It features splittable alnico-2 humbuckers, a master tone knob, and independent volume controls whose order (e.g., bridge first, neck second) can be toggled with a push-push button. Perhaps best of all, the new version features three fetching colors and a street price of $999. **fender.com**

Buy on Amazon

ABASI Larada

Prog-metal shredder Tosin Abasi brought a new namesake flagship model to NAMM. After a series of recent production changes, manufacturing of the guitars is now being overseen by famed luthier Grover Jackson. They're available in 6-, 7-, and 8-string versions, each with a basswood body, ebony-topped wenge neck, and a set of Fishman Fluence pickups. (Select customizable options will also be available.) The base model is expected to come in under $3,000 street, with a waitlist opening this spring. **abasiguitars.com**

IBANEZ
Axion Label RGA61AL

One of the head-turners from Ibanez this year was this lovely new Axion Label model. Around back it features a clear finish that reveals the grain in its 5-piece Wizard neck, while the front flaunts a purpleburst over flamed maple. There's also a Gibraltar bridge, a quick-access, no-tools-necessary truss-rod cover, and Bare Knuckle Aftermath pickups with coil-tap switching, all for about $1,299 street. **ibanez.com**

Buy on Amazon

RUOKANGAS
Mojo King with Valvebucker

When we ran into avant-dreamscapist extraordinaire David Torn at the show and asked what gear had wowed him, he raved about the dynamic sonics of the new pickup system devised by Finnish luthier Juha Ruokangas. The Valvebucker is an active pickup that uses NOS onboard military-spec tubes to yield several varieties of unique tones (plus boost) from a single pickup. Check out the demo video to hear them, as well as the fascinating backstory. **ruokangas.com**

TSAKALIS AUDIOWORKS Six

Greek builder Chris Tsakalis pulled off something that may very well be unprecedented in pedaldom: His new Six booster-overdrive-distortion ($239 street) maximizes headroom and responsiveness by successfully eliminating all capacitors from a tone circuit that lets you blend a half-dozen different combinations of sounds inspired by the famous Timmy, King of Tone, and Bluesbreaker pedals. There's even an internal voltage doubler that yields more headroom by letting you switch to 18-volt operation. **tsakalisaudioworks.com**

RAINGER FX Drone Rainger

Wanna create hypnotic soundscapes that feel warm and stuttery? The Drone Ranger is a digital delay, but with so much more that it's easy to get lost in the possibilities. For starters, you can set up two different pitched drones as a bedrock for your dreamscape and then switch between them on the fly. Street price is approximately $229. **raingerfx.com**

CHASE BLISS AUDIO & BENSON AMPS

Automatone Preamp MkII

Chase Bliss Audio's Joel Korte loved Chris Benson's preamp so much that the two collaborated on a version that holds 30 presets—and it's a trip to watch the automated sliders move when you recall them! The MkII also includes a fuzz circuit with silicon and germanium clipping, and deep control of mid frequencies. Availability and pricing are TBD, since Korte says he needs to "try and break it" before unleashing it to the public. **bensonamps.com, chaseblissaudio.com**

Effects cont'd

NU-X Horseman

Klon Centaur clones aren't exactly a new thing, but the Horseman does bring a couple of intriguing efforts to the crowded field: For starters, you can hold down the footswitch to toggle between the Nu-X's take on the original "silver" Centaur or the later "gold" version. Secondly, it goes for around $70 street. **nuxefx.com**

GAMECHANGER AUDIO

Motor Pedal

Inspired by the workings of old Hammond organs, the mad scientists from Latvia have yet again created one of the most interesting pedals at NAMM. Generating sound by sensing mechanical noise from a trio of spinning motors, the Motor Pedal can go from synth-y, bit-crushing tones to cleaner, more bouncy filtered tones. Imagine Aphex Twin jamming on a David Lynch soundtrack. There's also a built-in arpeggiator that, among other things, can sound straight out of a Super Mario Bros. game. Although still in development, Gamechanger's latest should be available in April. **gamechangeraudio.com**

STRYMON Volante

While demonstrating the mind-boggling array of tones in the multi-head-delay-emulating Volante ($399 street), Strymon DSP guru Pete Celi also showed us how its looper, reverb, tape-saturation, MIDI, and other features factor into the tantalizing ambience equation. **strymon.net**

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Amps

▲ ORANGE Pedal Baby 100

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orangeamps.com
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▲ MARSHALL Studio Series JCM800 & Super Lead

The U.K. amp giant came to NAMM with two captivating smaller-profile versions of legendary amps. Available in 20-watt heads ($1,299 street) driving either a 2x12 vertical cab ($799) or a 1x12 cab, or as a 1x10 combo ($1,499), the EL34-driven amps come in either a JCM800 version (right) or a 1959 Super Lead-inspired model. Both feature DI outputs and are switchable to 1 or 5 watts. **marshall.com**

◀ BLACKSTAR HT20RH MKII / JJN

Blackstar came to the show with several cool new blast boxes, including this signature head and 2x12 cab ($1,079 street for both) for up-and-coming blues-rocker Jared James Nichols. The head is essentially the redesigned HT20RH MkII ($549 street) with green covering, while Nichols' wicker-fronted cab is loaded with Celestion V-Type and G12T-75 speakers in place of the Celestion Seventy 80s in the standard cab ($379 street). Changes to both new versions include a smaller footprint, EL84 power tubes (vs. the MkI's EL34s), 20-to-2-watt power scaling, and a USB recording output. Both also feature an old-school-voiced digital reverb.
blackstaramps.com
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Amps cont'd

SUPRO Blues King

The relaunched brand's foray into smaller amps continues this year with the tweed-toned Blues King combo, which features a 3-band EQ, volume and master controls, spring reverb, FET-driven boost and gain functions, and 15 watts of beefy, 6L6-derived tone broadcast through a custom 12" speaker aimed to emulate those from the dawn of guitar amplification—all for about $599 street. **suprousa.com**

SOUND CITY SC20

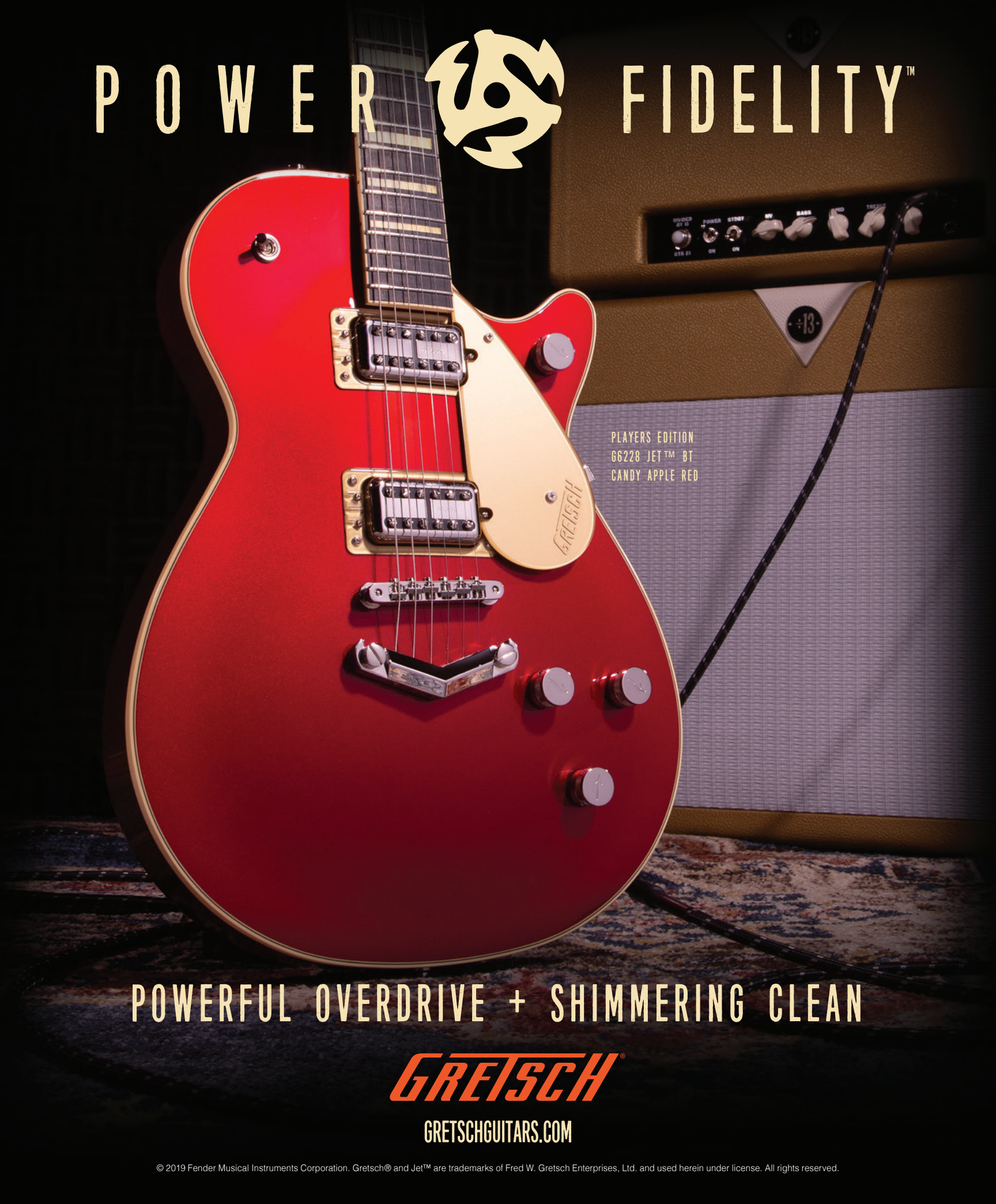
Continuing his efforts to bring the spirit of Dave Reeves' legendary amps of yore to today's players in smaller, lower-powered offerings, Steven Fryette showed off this 6V6-driven head that yields both impeccable touch sensitivity and a truly shocking amount of volume for a 20-watter. Controls include normal and bright volume, bass, mid, and treble knobs, and a knob for the Accutronics 3-spring reverb. **soundcityamp.com**

FENDER

Chris Stapleton '62 Princeton

Country superstar Chris Stapleton teamed up with the famed guitar brand to recreate the lusted-after '62 Princeton circuit. The result is an incredibly faithful model that seems to churn and growl every bit as much as its vintage counterparts. Meanwhile, the tube-bias trem is fantastically bubbly and warm. Street price is approximately $2,000. **fender.com**

Buy on Amazon



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Acoustic & Miscellaneous

PRESTIGE
Devin Townsend Signature

Renaissance metal man and all-around great guy Devin Townsend joined us at NAMM to demo the prototype of his new signature Empath dreadnought. The 25 1/2"-scale flattop features a torrefied Adirondack spruce top, rosewood back and sides, a layer of figured Canadian maple on the armrest and treble-cutaway bevels, and a Fishman Infinity undersaddle transducer. It's expected to fetch a street price in the range of $2,000–$2,500. **prestigeguitars.com**

BOSS Waza Tube Amp Expander

Boss came to Anaheim with this super-handy new tool for studio and stage. Designed to let you get cranked amp tones at reasonable volumes, the Waza Tube Amp Expander is a variable reactive load box with an active analog power stage, miked-cab simulation, IR loader, and recording interface. Street price is around $1,299. **boss.info**

TAYLOR Grand Pacific

Inspired by master builder Andy Powers' love of classic acoustic recordings (such as those by Doc Watson), Taylor's new understated slope-shoulder models aren't just outfitted with—but are actually the original inspiration for—the company's recent V-Class bracing innovation. In all of the trim-level variations we heard, it exhibited a remarkably warm and old-school sound that is sure to redefine how many players view the brand. Street prices begin in the low $2,000s. **taylorguitars.com**

ELECTRO-HARMONIX SuperSwitcher

For pedal legend Mike Matthews, this year NAMM meant the introduction of several new stomps. But perhaps most unusual/surprising was the unveiling of a highly intuitive, 8-loop, 16-bank programmable loop-switcher called the Super Switcher, which will go for $399 street. **ehx.com**

POWER.
PURITY.

The new Neo 250 Copperback

An iron fist in a velvet glove, the new Celestion Neo 250 Copperback combines mighty 250-Watts power handling and extended headroom with subtly expressive, touch-sensitive dynamics. And built with a neodymium magnet, all this power and purity weighs in at just 4.5lbs. Find out more at celestion.com

celestion.com

CELESTION

Make Your Creative Space Rock

BY PETE THORN

PETE THORN *is an L.A.-based guitarist who has toured with Chris Cornell, Melissa Etheridge, Tsuyoshi Nagabuchi, and many others. He released a solo album,* Guitar Nerd, *in 2011. Read more at peterthorn.com.*

Our columnist, shown having fun jamming and writing in his studio, has streamlined his space to be comfortable, efficient, and conducive to creativity.

Greetings, readers! As many of you know, I have a YouTube channel where the content mainly consists of demos of pedals and other guitar-related equipment. I've developed a style for these videos, with each including an original song that shows off the tones a piece of gear is capable of producing. This means I'm usually writing, recording, and mixing at least a few tracks each week. I'm often asked about my writing and production process—with questions regarding guitar tones, drums and drum programming, and mixing. Most often, however, people have questions about creativity and avoiding writer's block. To me, it all comes down to efficiency.

You need a zone to get in the zone. I lived in a small house in the '90s that I shared with a friend and his girlfriend. We had a full-blown project-recording studio in the living room with a drum kit, a piano, and guitar amps. We had a nice Soundcraft mixer, two Tascam DA-88 digital recorders, a rack of Neve mic pres, and a vintage U47 tube mic. But the reality is that I got very little done in that studio space. It was really only set up for live tracking.

When I'd sit down to write, I didn't know where to start. I couldn't play drums, so I'd have to rely on drummer pals to come over and lay down grooves, which was loud and impractical. The studio dominated the small house, so if I was trying to be creative with other people at home, they could hear everything I was doing. That made me feel self-conscious and I realized I'd probably get more done if I had a simple 4-track recorder and a drum machine in my bedroom. That way I could close the door and have some privacy!

The most important takeaway from this experience is that it's far more important for me to have a space in which I feel comfortable practicing, writing, or recording, as opposed to a studio full of gear where I feel self-conscious and intimidated.

The gear you choose isn't important. The workflow is. Legendary studio guitarist Tim Pierce was a big inspiration for me when setting up my own recording space. He has a ton of gear, but his workflow is incredibly streamlined. His guitar cabs are always miked, isolated, and ready to track. All his amps are on a switcher so he can quickly try different tones and select whatever cabinet he prefers.

The exact configuration and gear isn't important. What's vital is the fact that he can dial in tones *fast*, so when he hears an idea in his head, he can be laying it down seconds later. Because he's so comfortable making music in his space, I'd argue that producers would be hard-pressed to get superior results at major full-blown studios with Tim. I can't stress enough that the actual tools aren't the key. It's the organization and efficiency that is paramount. Tim would be just as effective with nothing more than a laptop, headphones, and some plug-ins or digital modelers.

Templates are your friend. With the advent of digital modelers, guitar amp plug-ins, and tools like load boxes and speaker simulators, anyone with a laptop can play and record with world-class tones virtually anywhere. All DAWs and recording interface software will allow you to make what's called a template. Templates are like musical blank canvases that can be personalized. All the routing of inputs, outputs, and plug-in effects and instruments can be stored, so when you sit down to play and create, your virtual studio becomes like a second instrument. You can make different templates for practice, recording, etc., and you can configure them however you like to suit your creative workflow.

What's also become paramount for me is the ability to pull up inspiring drum sounds and parts quickly. It's *always* more fun and inspiring to play and write riffs and songs if there are some drums to jam to. I personally use Superior Drummer 3, EZdrummer 2, and Steven Slate Drums to get some happening grooves going quickly and easily.

Likewise, great guitar and bass tones can also be had quickly and efficiently in my studio. I'm *always* patched into a tuner via an A/B box, and, like Tim, I've incorporated an amp switcher into my studio (an Ampete 88S) so I can quickly switch between up to eight heads and a variety of cabinet options. I tend to use plug-ins and modelers for bass (either UA Ampeg plug-ins, or my Axe-Fx III or Line 6 Helix modelers), and I'll sometimes use amp plug-ins for guitar as well.

The biggest key is streamlining from point A (the ideas in your head) to point B (a finished song, riff, or idea). *This* is how my creative output can stay steady. I've made it easy to practice, record, and be creative. It's never been simpler and it's possible on just about any budget, so imagine your dream creative space and set out to create it. Until next month, I wish you great tone!

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TAPPER'S DELIGHT

Photo by Ken Susi

Sarah Longfield *brings two-handed tapping into a brave new world of melody and texture. And yes, she shreds, too.*

BY JOE CHARUPAKORN

One of the many things 8-string-guitar virtuoso Sarah Longfield is known for is her breathtaking tapping technique. But unlike previous generations of shredders, this twentysomething guitar sensation has never really listened to Eddie Van Halen, the undisputed godfather of tapping. She's more likely to take influence from Animals as Leaders' "CAFO" than Van Halen's "Eruption."

While that might seem like sacrilege to the old guard, looking at tapping through a new lens has allowed Longfield to create a unique style. You won't hear her play the clichéd, repeating three-note tapped arpeggio shapes that defined tapping—the ones that virtually *every single shredder* copped from EVH, regurgitated ad nauseam, and didn't have the imagination to see beyond. Longfield's multifaceted approach treats the guitar like a piano. That's apt, since she studied piano as a child. She'll use multiple tapping fingers to play melodies over sustained left-hand chords or integrate sweeps with tapping to facilitate lightning-fast, cascading multi-octave arpeggios and linear scale sequences.

Amazingly, tapping and the many other shred techniques she's mastered reflect only a tiny fraction of what Longfield is about. She is a multi-instrumentalist who can sing, play drums, and write and arrange in dense orchestral layers. Her production skills are also top notch.

But talent alone can only get you so far, and like many of her millennial peers, Longfield has rewritten the music-career rulebook using internet marketing to propel herself into hyper-drive. She picked up the guitar at 12, and by age 14 she had put up her first YouTube guitar video. Her videos are insanely varied and feature her playing all instruments—on "1 Woman Prog Metal Band" along with covers of everything from Meshuggah's "Bleed" to Rihanna's "Stay" to Animals as Leaders' ultra-complex "Tempting Time" (for which she's posted a drum cover, although most drummers wouldn't dare attempt playing this one).

Through YouTube, Longfield amassed a huge following and industry people soon took notice. Guitar heroes like Matt Heafy and John 5 have given her their seal of approval online. And today, Longfield has found her way into the upper echelons of the shred guitar world—even opening for Steve Vai in Sweden.

Led by her strong DIY ethos, Longfield has sold her music online through various platforms like Bandcamp and DistroKid. Recently she signed to France-based metal label Season of Mist Records, and with their support is now reaching out to a broader audience. Her latest release, *Disparity*, reveals a shift away from heavier styles to a sound more influenced by electronica. Of course, there are heavy doses of guitar pyrotechnics, as you'd expect.

Premier Guitar caught up with Longfield, fresh off a clinic tour in Taiwan, to discuss *Disparity* and her shift to a mellower style, why guitar lessons never worked for her, what it's like being one of only a handful of high-profile females in a genre dominated by males, and what pop act she'd join if the opportunity arose.

Sarah Longfield favors a pair of Strandberg Boden Metal models, including this 8-string with a custom finish and Fishman Fluence pickups. She also plays a 6-string version and has a signature model in development.

In the male-dominated world of shred, Longfield's technique draws a crowd's attention everywhere—from opening concerts for Steve Vai in Sweden to the NAMM Show floor, where she's wielding a 6-string Strandberg in this photo.

TIDBIT

Longfield produced and mixed her label debut to be sure it matched her vision of lush, textured sounds when it was completed. Early on, she got production tips from Keith Merrow, who, she says, "changed my life."

How would you describe your music?
I usually say prog-rock because I don't feel like I'm super metal anymore.

***Disparity* almost has a new-age vibe. It's ethereal and atmospheric.**
Yeah, and that's totally what I'm trying to move towards. I love metal and I did it for a really long time, but I think my sound is developing into something a bit different, and definitely a lot lighter.

What led to this stylistic shift?
I've been listening to a ton of electronic music, which is the opposite of metal. It's like those two genres blending into something a bit mellower than what I was doing when I was younger. I've kind of mellowed out as I've gotten older, which is cool, and that reflects in my music.

How do you structure your songs? They're not in obvious forms like intro-verse-chorus.
I'm still working on that, because I feel like I suck at song structure.

It seems to work. They all feel like cohesive pieces from beginning to end.
Yay! Well, that's definitely good. That's what I'm going for. When I'm writing, I write everything at the same time. I won't write just the guitar part. I'll write eight bars of guitar, eight bars of bass, eight bars of drums, eight bars of synths, and then maybe I'll put the vocals in there. Then I'll finish that chunk, and then write the next chunk.

So you're composing in mini sections?
Yep. I just do it chunk by chunk, then I try to reorganize it in my DAW, and then I'll re-track everything.

The guitar isn't necessarily the focal point on numbers like "Embracing Solace." Do you feel like you don't have to prove yourself anymore?
Yeah. I kind of wanted to step away. I feel like I've done a lot of guitar stuff. I don't feel like I need to use that to reach my audience anymore. It's really freeing as an artist when you get to that point. Everyone knows me for guitar stuff, but I'm at a point where I'm like, "I can do other stuff too."

Are you self-taught?
I'm self-taught on guitar. I did have piano lessons when I was a kid. I tried to have guitar teachers but, I don't know, it never really made any sense to me. So it felt kind of weird to keep paying guitar teachers because I wasn't really learning how to play guitar. I ended up using YouTube as a reference, and watching people play, and kind of like, "monkey see, monkey do."

Did you have teachers that wanted to teach you, say, Eric Clapton licks when you might have had different interests?
I've had people try to teach me *everything*, even up to last year. When I was living in Boston, I was looking into teachers that taught everything from super fancy jazz stuff to metal, and I can't figure it out. I don't know.

Do you understand music theory?
I would like to learn someday, if I could. Just so I could jam with people. I mean, I could jam but I don't really know what I'm doing at all. So I feel kind of stupid when I'm in a room full of Berklee students and stuff. [*Laughs.*]

Though you say you don't know what you're doing, you use harmonically advanced sounds like major 7#5 chords and arpeggios.
I blame piano for that. I got a lot of connections between notes and scales in my head when I was a kid.

Tosin Abasi also uses those types of sounds.
Yeah, he's a huge inspiration, so that's there for sure.

Tell us about your lesson with Tosin in 2011.
That was a really cool day. I was a tech death player and just wanted to be Necrophagist, and I never used the clean channel even once, I think. We sat down on the bus and we were just plugged into an audio box into the PA. I was so nervous, like "I have to play on the clean channel ... I'm gonna suck." He just showed me how to play some stuff on the clean channel that was with a pick using a sweep arpeggio, then stuff that was tapping but moving all the way up and down the fretboard. I don't even really remember because I was so nervous. It definitely changed a lot of things, because that was the first time I'd ever been like, "Oh, you can shred, but on the clean channel." I wanted to expand on that.

What is your practice routine?
I don't really have a practice routine. I should probably have one. I'm at a point where I just like to make music a lot, so three or four times

Photo by Derek Sampson

a week, I just sit down and write music with my guitar. Then I'll play what I'm writing.

How do you maintain your chops?
It's just muscle memory. I think once I learn how to do a thing, as long as I don't overthink it, my muscles just kind of remember how to do the thing. Before a tour or something, I'll run through material with the guys for a week or so, and we'll go on the road, and chops definitely get better when you're on tour. I don't think any of my stuff is too demanding, you know.

How did you get into tapping?
The tapping thing wasn't intentional. I love when people ask that because I finally get to elaborate. I couldn't play guitar the way I wanted to. I would listen to music and would want to learn how to play it, but I wasn't being taught, so I didn't know how to play it. I didn't know what the natural progression was. So I was doing a lot of stuff by ear, because in the beginning I didn't know tabs existed. The tapping thing for me was a quicker way to play what I wanted to play, because I wasn't very good at picking yet.

I'm willing to bet that Eddie Van Halen was not an influence on you.
Not really. I didn't listen to a ton of guitar players. I probably should because that's probably what you should do, but when I was younger and trying to learn stuff, it was just from the knowledge that I had from previous instruments.

What about Stanley Jordan? His tapping style is closer to yours than Van Halen's.
I've had a lot of people tell me about him. I listened to some of his music. He's really good.

What are you using for string mutes?
I used to make my own mutes out of foam and faux suede, and I put Velcro on them because I could never find a mute that I really liked. Then I lost all of the mutes that I made. Now I just use a sock. If the sock is too big, I'll cut the sock down, but usually I can find an ankle sock and tie it around. Or I'll cut up a pair of tights or something. Those work really well, too.

You also devote a lot of time to production and have mentioned that you took production lessons with Keith Merrow in 2011.
Keith Merrow is like the best dude. He changed my life. I had no idea how to make music or record music, and it was so frustrating for me to try to overcome the learning curve of a DAW that I just wouldn't write music on a guitar. I would program everything in MIDI rolls that wasn't even guitar music, in SONAR Home Studio 6. It was really bad. Then I met him and he was like, "You need to do this," and he kind of taught me the basics, "This is an EQ. This is a compressor. This is what they do." I sucked at that like four or five years and now I'm kind of figuring it out.

Did you produce *Disparity* yourself?
Yeah. I wanted to mix it myself because my songs have so many

At the NAMM Show, Longfield displays her technique—which is conceptually rooted in the piano lessons she took as a youngster—on a 6-string Strandberg Boden Metal.

SARAH LONGFIELD'S GEAR

GUITARS

- Strandberg Boden Metal (6- and 8-string models)

AMPS

- Engl Powerball II
- Orange 2x12 cabinet
- Fractal Audio Axe-Fx II

EFFECTS

- Darkglass Hyper Luminal Hybrid Compressor

STRINGS & PICKS

- D'Addario (.009–.042 for 6-string; .009–.080 for 8-string)
- Dunlop Tortex .50 mm

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tracks with really subtle synth stuff that I didn't know if I could send it off to someone and feel good about it.

Would you consider a career as a producer?
Yeah, I would love to do that. That's like totally one of my end games. I think mixing and mastering is so fun. It's a whole separate art and it's like being a part of the whole process—writing, recording, mixing, and mastering. It's so fun to me. I love the whole process, just seeing it come to life.

Let's talk gear. How did your relationship with Strandberg begin?
It was kind of an accident. It was 2011 or 2012, and I ordered a custom guitar from a company that I can't name right now, but, basically, there was a miscommunication and the guitar got messed up. They were doing a couple of demo production runs for Strandberg at the time in the U.S., so they were like, "We kind of messed up but we can give you a discount on one of these Strandbergs we've got lying around." I was like, "Oh yeah, that would be sweet." And I got that and I made some videos with it, and Ola [Strandberg] saw it and was like, "We should work together. Your style fits my brand." And I was like, "Cool, because your guitars fit my style." It's been great. We're working on a signature guitar right now, which I'm so stoked about.

You've said that you don't like the dirt from the Axe-Fx.
Yeah, I don't. I want to so bad, because I have so many cool effects, and you can make space noises and stuff, but I really just hate the distortion tones on it. I don't know why. People have sent me patches, but I just can't make it work. They did just come out with the Axe-Fx III, so maybe someday when I save up ... hopefully the distortion on the new one is a little different. It sounds good. It just doesn't feel the same. I actually prefer to use amps live. I hate to be that person, but I really do like the way they feel. I use an ENGL Powerball II and an Orange 2x12 cab. That's what I prefer, but because I fly so much, sometimes it's just easier to fly with the Axe-Fx.

At times, your clean sound is reminiscent of a harp.
Yeah, I love that. It's the Fishman Fluence pickups. I use one of the second voicings and it's like a coil-tap, almost, and you can get this harp-like, tinnier, thinner, but really attack-y sound. It's almost like the pickups are compressed, so I don't really use a compressor. Though I got a compressor for the first time a few weeks ago—the Darkglass Hyper Luminal Compressor—and I have been using it. It's awesome, especially for cleans.

Are you able to support yourself through the creators' platform Patreon?
Patreon is huge. I was living off album sales for about a year, which is really cool.

Wow, that's awesome.
Yeah, right? I was selling albums on Bandcamp and then I eventually got Distrokid, and I was doing a little bit of promotion on YouTube and stuff. The YouTube ad revenue checks are absolutely garbage. I think I made like $100 last month and I got like 400,000 views. They pay absolute trash. So I was relying completely on album sales, and then I signed to a label and was like, "Oh shit, what am I going to do?"

Are there pros and cons to being signed to a label?
I think it's a tradeoff. I was making money completely independently off my CD sales, and I was really comfortable doing that. But the PR that the label has is incredible. A lot of people don't take you seriously until you have representation. I've been denied tours because they're like, "you don't have representation" or "well, we're gonna see who the label wants to bring on first before we reach out to any independent artists." I think there's a level of validation with that, and the PR is incredible, so I'm really happy with it. But I was like, "Oh shit, how am I gonna pay rent? I don't have a job right now." So I started the Patreon thing and that's been great to help me kind of supplement.

Does having to deal with internet trolls or check comments make you anxious?
It's tough to say. Every artist is a little bit affected by that, but I was such a weird kid, and I was bullied so much for being so strange when I was younger. I couldn't wear jeans because I felt they hurt. I wore weird clothes and I had short hair because I didn't like the feeling of my hair tickling my neck. I was super sensitive and weird looking [*laughs*], so people just made fun of me. So when I got to the internet, I was like, "Yo, you can't hurt me." I'm not really affected by that kind of thing. I just think it's kind of funny.

Being a female in a genre that's dominated by males, did you deal with sexism or

Photo by Derek Sampson

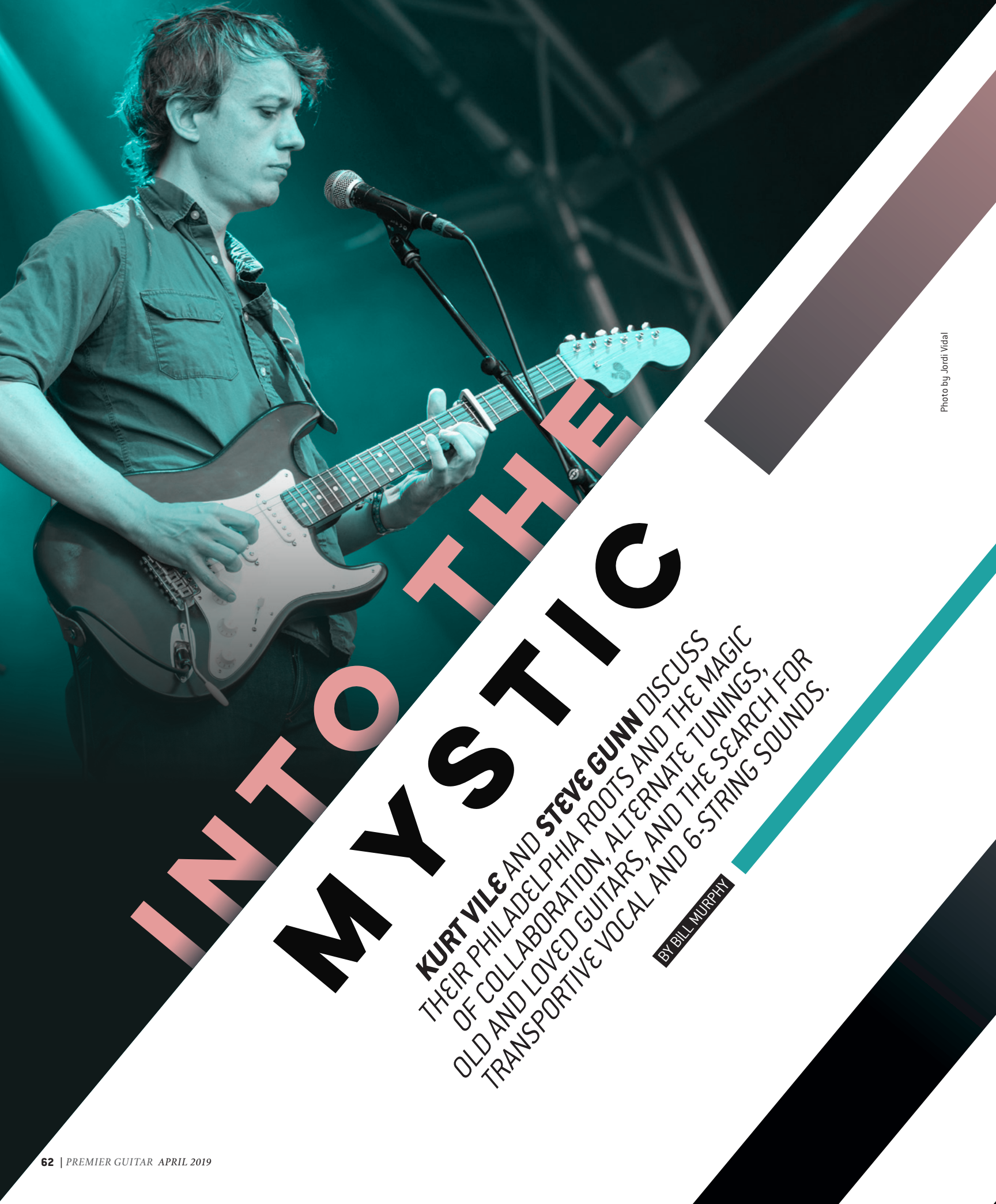
harassment in the industry? You're on the road with mostly guys.
That's kind of how it's always been, with prog-metal stuff. When I was younger I was super naïve to it. Especially because, like I said, I was so weird. I had no frame of reference for how to do really anything, and I think there were a lot of people that tried to take advantage of that. People in bands would plus one me to shows and stuff because they saw a video on YouTube or something, and then I'd be like, "Oh cool, I love this band." Then I'd go there and realize after like two hours of being there *why* they actually wanted me to be there. I thought they just wanted to hang out and talk about guitar stuff. Nope. [*Laughs*.]

They're not all like that. I've met a ton of people in the industry that are super chill and are genuinely just like, "Aw man, I love what you do." But I didn't know how to distinguish that when I was younger. I thought everybody just had good intentions. Then you realize that's totally not the case. Now I think it's so much better because, A, I know, I can tell now. I have more experience with it. And, B, honestly, I have more power, so people don't try to do that anymore because they're scared that if they do anything, I'm gonna say something. I have an audience, so they're a lot more respectful.

It's not just low-hanging fruit. You meet people at the top in companies that are like that, and you're like, "whoa!" [*Laughs*.] "Holy shit, you can't be like that. That's *not* cool." But yeah, I can see it now, so it's not a threat anymore.

If you could join a major pop act would you?
Oh, 100 percent. I would love to play guitar for a pop act. That's one of my absolute end goals.

Which pop act would your fans be surprised you'd want to join?
It's not really a band. I guess, honestly, if I could play live with anybody, it would be Post Malone. [*Laughs*.] He's so good. I love his music. I love his albums. But, yeah, I think that would be my top pop star. Maybe Ellie Goulding. She's incredible, too. Maybe someday.



INTO THE MYSTIC

KURT VILE AND **STEVE GUNN** DISCUSS THEIR PHILADELPHIA ROOTS AND THE MAGIC OF COLLABORATION, ALTERNATE TUNINGS, OLD AND LOVED GUITARS, AND THE SEARCH FOR TRANSPORTIVE VOCAL AND 6-STRING SOUNDS.

BY BILL MURPHY

Photo by Jordi Vidal

On the phone from Dallas, where he's prepping to hit the stage with his elite backing band, the Violators, Kurt Vile is musing over a question about the perceived sense of mysticism in his music, and how it might fuel his creative process. "Well, first I go down to the Shire," he drawls wryly, pausing for effect, "and then I get a bunch of shiny stones...." He trails off in a brief fit of laughter, while down the Brooklyn end of the line, Steve Gunn joins him. "Yeah, I see it," he gushes, and then just like that, we're off on a multifarious tangent about lyrical poetry and hypnotic grooves—and how music, in the right moment, can induce an exalted state, in the listener as well as the performer.

"Just even picking up my guitar and playing a couple of chords can transport me," Vile continues, his tone more reflective now. "It's a state of mind, it's a place, it's a dimension, really. Music just does that, especially if you're behind the wheel, driving it. All of a sudden, next thing you know, you're spacing out for hours on the couch, even after just a couple of minutes. If you're stressed out about shit, you can just play, and for a second your mind is completely changed. So yeah—it's *mystical*."

He and Gunn share another laugh. It's testament to the bond they have as artists who don't take themselves *too* seriously, but who nevertheless are seeking to remake—some might even say *rescue*—guitar-driven rock in their own implacably cool, blue-collar vagabond image.

For Vile, the journey is rooted in the country, blues, and bluegrass he picked up on as a kid. His first instrument was the banjo. Eventually he adapted some of the instrument's open-tuned techniques to guitar, and developed a personal style that tapped into an eclectic range of musical influences, from Bob Dylan to Sonic Youth. After a short stint living in Boston, he moved back to his hometown of Philadelphia in 2003 and met singer-songwriter Adam Granduciel, who channeled his own obsession with Dylan into the War on Drugs—a band that, along with the Violators, lit fire to the city's resurgent indie rock scene.

Bottle It In is Vile's latest album with the Violators, and it captures a knockabout genius at his most freewheeling and

Photo by Debi Del Grande

comfortable. "Loading Zones," a slacker ode to the thrills and spills of free parking in Philly, sets the tone early: Vile has a way of uncovering simple and ecstatic truths in his songwriting, whether he's looking to "rip the world a new one" or, as he sings on the hypnotic jam "Bassackwards," to "fill the void of a long night, unwatched by the sun." Wielding his favorite '64 sunburst Fender Jaguar and various Martin acoustic guitars, he builds layers of sound that push his coproducers (among them Peter Katis, Rob Schnapf, Shawn Everett, and bandmate Rob Laakso) to the limit, while also giving his band (Laakso, guitarist Jesse Trbovich, drummer Kyle Spence, and various distinguished guests) plenty of leeway to dig into the beating heart of a song.

Gunn picks up the thread again. "Do you know that Jackson C. Frank song—I think the lyric is 'To sing is a state of mind'?" he asks Vile, referring to "Just Like Anything," an obscure chestnut from the troubled folk singer's 1965 debut album. "It's such a beautiful concept. Certain music puts you in a certain state of mind, and for me, I definitely have to work to get there. When I first started playing, I wasn't exactly practicing Van Halen riffs, but I would play things on repeat and try to get into my own head a little bit. Doing that really cyclical guitar stuff helps me to get into more of a meditative state to sing, or to think about what I want to write."

Gunn is also a Philly native, born and raised—as was Vile—in the western suburb of Lansdowne, and although he decamped to Brooklyn in 2001, his hometown is never far from his thoughts. "Stonehurst Cowboy," from his new album *The Unseen in Between*, is a stunningly beautiful acoustic ballad dedicated to his late father and named for the neighborhood where his parents grew up. The song also channels Gunn's deep connection to American Primitive and British folk music. After he graduated from Temple University, he lived in a house full of artists and musicians in West Philly where Jack Rose sometimes jammed, and where the records of John Fahey, Sandy Bull, and Robbie Basho were frequent staples. More recently, he has toured and recorded with British folk legend Michael Chapman. Chapman's exquisite "comeback" album *50*, produced by Gunn, is an unmitigated career milestone.

Since 2007, Gunn has released more than a dozen solo albums and collaborations, including 2015's *Parallelogram* EP with Vile, but *The Unseen in Between*, his second for Matador, is arguably his finest—and not just as a catalog of his influences, which range from folk to free jazz to psychedelic rock. Tracked in Brooklyn with an ace band featuring James Elkington (guitar and keyboards), TJ Mainani (drums), and upright bassist Tony Garnier (known for his long-running tenure in Bob Dylan's band), the album flows with a sure-footed ease and a real sense of purpose. That intent lives in the tripped-out vibrato waves of "New Moon" (with a nod to Johnny Marr's knack for thick guitar textures) and the folk-meets-Krautrock groove of "Lightning Field," which finds Gunn laying into a complex open-D figure that helps steer the song into wide vistas of sound, reverberant and majestic, that recall the more orchestral efforts of the Velvet Underground or Pink Floyd.

"You know, they gave me your new CD the other day," Vile reveals, regaling Gunn with recent tales of the road. "I started listening to it on the bus, and I smoked some weed because I hadn't been drinking—and when I say *weed*, I mean, I can't even handle the real *action* plants. Anyway, it sounded really good. I heard a few tracks and passed out, but I can't wait to hear the rest. It's atmospheric and beautiful."

Gunn laughs again and graciously accepts the compliment, and for a moment the brothers-in-arms camaraderie that these two must have shared together on tour back in 2013, when Gunn joined the Violators to support Vile's breakthrough album *Wakin on a Pretty Daze*, becomes palpable. Although they grew up just a few miles from each other, they didn't meet for the first time until they were both established as rising stars, each with an eclectic arsenal of guitar chops and a fetish for vintage Fender gear and Martin acoustics. And now here they are, full circle.

You both went to the same grade school in Lansdowne, but do you remember when you actually met?
Kurt Vile: Well, I always forget about the time, but we did this thing with Meg [Baird]. It was sort of like a supergroup of Philly types doing all these songs. I remember we did "Street Hassle" by Lou Reed. My bandmate, Jesse [Trbovich] was in it, Meg, of course, and having Steve there was really nice. What did we do? We did "Street Hassle," we did "They Don't Know About Us."
Steve Gunn: I think we did Big Star too.
Vile: Yeah, "Thirteen," I think. You lived in New York by that time, but you were visiting Philly, and that's how we really met.
Gunn: You know, the very first time I saw you play, and I made the connection that you were the same person from Lansdowne, was at Vox Populi [an artist-run event space in Philly]. I don't remember if I even said hello, but I did buy a CD, which was *Constant Hitmaker* [2008]. I knew your name and I knew where your family lived. We never were friends then, but I made that connection. And then you also took lessons at Todaro's, and I did too.

Was he a local guy?
Vile: Yeah, Todaro's Music was in Lansdowne, where we're from.
Gunn: I actually took bass lessons first, from a very polite metal dude.

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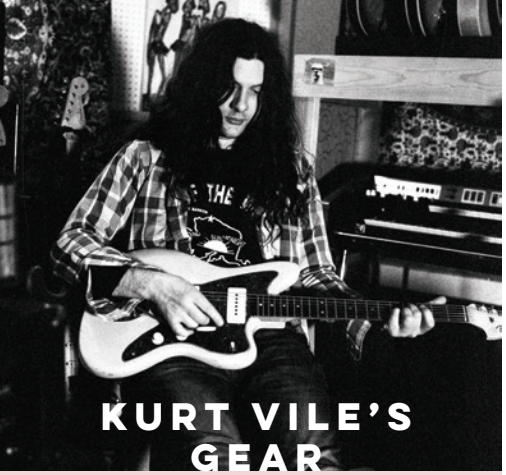


KURT VILE'S GEAR

GUITARS

- Two 1964 Fender Jaguars (one for standard tuning, one for open tunings)
- 1966 Fender Mustang
- 1966 Fender Electric XII
- 1961 Guild Starfire
- Fender American Original '60s Jaguar
- Fender American Original '60s Jazzmaster
- Greco "lawsuit" Les Paul
- Martin custom 00 hybrids (from Fred Oster's Vintage Instruments, Philadelphia)
- Fender Palomino
- Baxendale custom
- Collings Waterloo
- Martin DC-16RGTE (played live)
- Gold Tone Paul Beard Squareneck Deluxe resonator
- Buckeye 5-string banjo
- '65 American Vintage Jazzmaster

AMPS

- 1967 Fender Bassman
- Fender Deluxe Reverb (blackface reissue)

EFFECTS

- Trbo Booster (designed by Jesse Trbovich)
- Sovtek Russian Big Muff
- Mountainking Electronics O.C.M. digital noise generator
- Line 6 FM4 Filter Modeler
- MXR M169 Carbon Copy
- Dunlop Cry Baby wah

STRINGS & PICKS

- D'Addario EXP14 Bluegrass light top/medium bottom (.012–.056)
- Ernie Ball Beefy Slinky (.011–.054)

Vile: Oh, so you didn't take lessons from Joe [Todaro]? He taught me banjo.
Gunn: I may have taken one or two lessons from him, but there was another guy teaching there. But I still go in there—the shop is still there.

How did growing up in the Philly area shape you both musically?
Vile: I get this question often, and it's always a little hard to explain. But when I think of my music and when I think of Philly, some of it comes back to the Record Exchange. I would go there a lot, but I was shy and I didn't know anybody by name. I was buying 7-inches and stuff. I remember vividly getting various Lou Reed records, from *Street Hassle* to *Mistrial*. And then in my 20s, there was a Siltbreeze lo-fi resurgence that came around, so that was influential in reconfirming my D.I.Y. thing, and that I should keep doing it.
Gunn: My parents were super into music, and they grew up in an area of Philly near 69th Street, where there were a lot of DJs, mostly into soul and R&B music. And, you know, when you're a kid approaching 15, 16, you have to make that weird decision: Do I want to play sports, or do I want to skateboard more? When I expressed interest in playing music, my parents were super supportive, so I just started playing incessantly. And I mean, I *still* crave that solitude, and locking yourself in your room and just playing and playing, and using your imagination in that way.

When I got a little older, I realized that Philly at the time had a lot of great radio programming. Temple had all these cool jazz programs, and Drexel University and WKDU. And my curiosity was just being pulled around by hearing jazz and all this different music.

You both have an exploratory approach to the guitar—especially with alternate tunings. How does that affect your songwriting, and are there particular players, like John Fahey, who drew you to this kind of experimentation?
Vile: Definitely. John Fahey was later, but being an easily influenced teen, I read some interviews in the indie rock world where they were using it, too. Pavement and Sonic Youth, obviously, were using all these different tunings, and they were influenced by Fahey, I guess. My dad would always play the old time stuff, and the banjo started that off for me, too. And later on, the Delta blues. You could make up your own tunings, or find out what tuning someone else used and try that.
Gunn: I think it sounds *fuller* if you're playing solo with open tunings. You can get into the dexterity of your hands.
Vile: Fingerpicking and open tuning go hand-in-hand.
Gunn: Yeah. I just sort of wander around the neck until I think something sounds cool. Experimenting with that stuff, especially with capos—you can kind of find your key that you love to sing in, and focus on that. But now, I'm actually trying to get out of that. I'm almost in like a capo jail, or an open-tuning jail [*laughs*]. I've started trying to write songs more simply, with standard tuning.
Vile: It's the same for me. I like to go with standard tuning now and just play rock 'n' roll up onstage.

Do you each have a go-to acoustic you keep around for songwriting?
Gunn: I have one that just got smashed, which is unfortunate. Jet Blue, man—they got me. It was a Martin 000-18. It wasn't vintage or anything, but it was nice and it was my main guitar.
Vile: Do you ever go to that place in Philly, Vintage Instruments?
Gunn: Yeah. That place is amazing.
Vile: They had Martin custom-make limited versions of some of their favorite vintage models. The one I have is the Philadelphia Folk Festival anniversary edition. That's the first one I got—it's all over *Wakin on a Pretty Day*. Then I have a newer one that's more yellowish. They're both my go-tos.
Gunn: Don't you have one of those Baxendale guitars too?
Vile: I've got a couple of those. I love them. They take older, cheap guitars and make them nicer. I have a Kay dreadnought that I play on "Wakin on a Pretty Day" live. I keep that tuned a half-step down. Then I have a Silvertone I play on "Wild Imagination" that I keep tuned up a half-step.

You guys play a lot of different electric guitars, but can you talk specifically about the importance that Fenders, and particularly Jaguars and Strats, play in your sound?
Gunn: Well, I have a custom Strat made by Brian Haran down in North Carolina. He has a company called Fret Sounds. He put Lindy Fralin pickups in it for me and it sounds really good.

Photo by Jo McCaughey

BUY THE GEAR ›

Vile: I've always been drawn to Fender, but it took me a while to realize that it was the Jaguar for me. I like the sunburst Jaguars, and then my bandmate Rob [Laakso] hipped me to the fact that pre-CBS is what I should go for. So I had a '64, and then it just went from there. That was my main guitar starting around the *Smoke Ring for My Halo* album [2011], but by the time *Wakin* came around, I got another similar Jaguar so that at least with all the different tunings, I could use the same guitar if I wanted.

Do you both use Fender amps on a regular basis?
Vile: Yeah, I've got a '65 blackface Deluxe. I'm not using that quite as much now, but when I play solos, I have a little brown Champ, like a '58, and it's my favorite sound. With the Jazzmaster or the Jaguar, it's somewhere between the blues meets My Bloody Valentine.
Gunn: Yeah, I have a Deluxe, too. Over the years I've been getting smaller. I had a Twin forever, and then I got tired of carrying that thing around, so I got a Deluxe, and then I got a Princeton, and now I have a Champ, too. That's a '66 Champ that I really like.
Vile: I got a '65 Vibro Champ a long time ago. It's funny how you just go smaller all the time. And you realize then you can really push it in the house, you know?
Gunn: Oh yeah, and in the studio, too.

Does going smaller also make it easier to hear the band?
Vile: Well, I'm going deaf all the time, but I have in-ear monitors, which are really hard when you're trying to feel like you're actually playing music without feeling isolated. I finally found these in-ears that have holes in them, so you can hear what's around you. You play really loud, honestly, if you don't have in-ears. If you have them, you can play quieter on stage and push it in the house, but it's not for everyone.

The two of you also write a lot about traveling and moving, and I wonder if some of your favorite songwriters deliver that for you.
Vile: You know, I love that song by Willie Nelson, "Still Is Still Moving to Me." When I think about that, it's sort of the same

thing, like sitting on the couch while traveling a million miles in my head, or you could be on a bus that's sitting still, but you're still moving.

Gunn: Sometimes people tell me, "I don't even listen to your lyrics. I just like the sound of your voice, because it takes me to this place." Obviously I write and edit my words, and try to come up with concepts. I don't want to say that I use *poetry* in my lyrics, but I try to use descriptive words that maybe help get someone thinking about not necessarily what I'm singing about, but stimulate their imagination by using more imagery in the words. But I was also thinking about how the voice can just set a *mood*, where you're not riding on every word, but the voice is the focus. One of my favorite singers is Sandy Denny [from Fairport Convention], and just the sound of her voice sometimes makes me want to weep.

Vile: "Farewell, Farewell"?

Gunn: Yeah, and "Who Knows Where the Time Goes?" I mean, the lyrics are amazing, and I think she wrote that when she was really young.

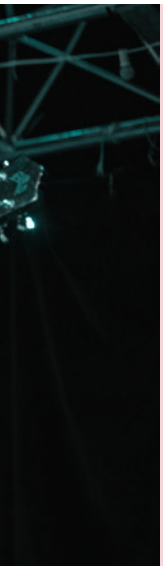
When you work with a producer, what are you looking for and listening for?

Vile: Ideally you just want to find people whose sound you like. You always feel it out at first. I wanted to work with John Agnello a long time ago, and that was great—we did two records. Then with *b'lieve I'm goin down* [2015], Rob Schnapf reached out, which was perfect because we had hit a wall. Then we ran out of time with him, and the record still wasn't done, so Rob knew Peter Katis, and he rescued the record at the end and mixed it really fast.

So with the new album, we started with Peter, and then I went back to Rob, but I was curious to have one more sound—somebody who was painting with some different colors—so Shawn Everett's name came up, and then he reached out and showed enthusiasm. Part of it is someone showing the enthusiasm, to want to do it. But it's funny, I like to find multiple people within an album.

Although he also plays Martins, Gunn's frequent acoustic companion is a 1970 Guild D-35, with a spruce top and mahogany back and sides. He describes the D-35 as "perfect for me."

Photo by Tim Bugbee/Tinnitus Photography



STEVE GUNN'S GEAR

GUITARS

- Custom S-style built by Brian Haran (Fret Sounds) with Lindy Fralin pickups
- 2017 Fender American Professional Jaguar
- 2014 Martin Special Edition 000-18 acoustic
- 1970 Guild D-35

AMPS

- 1970s Fender Twin Reverb
- 1968 Fender Princeton
- 1966 Fender Champ

EFFECTS

- Real McCoy RMC2 Wah
- Ibanez TS9 Tube Screamer
- EarthQuaker Devices Palisades overdrive
- Electro-Harmonix Freeze Sound Retainer
- Electro-Harmonix Soul Food
- Catalinbread Belle Epoch Tape Echo

STRINGS & PICKS

- D'Addario EXP14 Bluegrass light top/medium bottom (.012–.056)
- Fred Kelly banjo picks

Gunn: I feel like I'm still learning. But this last record almost felt like a *real* session. It was a studio I had just visited, and the engineer, Daniel Schlett, had almost an old-school approach to recording, where it felt simple and you just wanted to focus on getting good sounds and not overdoing it.
Vile: The production is really amazing on that record.
Gunn: Oh cool, thanks. And another thing I did, that I hadn't really done before—I just wanted to be comfortable. I get really nervous, and I always feel like I'm spinning my wheels.
Vile: That's me, too, definitely.
Gunn: Yeah, and doing bad takes and wasting time, and then it's like, "Hey, you know the clock's ticking, we gotta get this fucking done!" So I really worked on singing and playing the songs *a lot* before I went into the studio. And then just kind of randomly, I linked up with Tony Garnier, who plays with Bob Dylan.
Vile: I'm stoked to hear about this!
Gunn: I ended up meeting him because he was working in the same studio the week before with Marc Ribot. And Daniel is a Dylan nerd like me, so he texted me and told me I should come by just to say hello. And Tony was just super-friendly and interested, and wanted to hear some demos. So he came in just to see how it might go, and he ended up playing on the whole thing. Tony was playing upright, and he had this really awesome electric bass—it was a 1959 Hofner, not a Beatle-bass, but a big-bodied one. These basses were a hundred years apart. I was like, "How old is that thing?" and he says, "It's from 1859." And he picked it up and goes, "Check this out," and on the side in scripted pen, it says *Charles Mingus*. Apparently he doesn't even tour with it because it belonged to Charles Mingus.

And it was so cool to have Tony there, because he basically was like, "Man, just be yourself and go sing the song, and we'll play behind you." He asked me to print out the lyrics, and he was really getting inside of the song, almost treating it *as a song*. I don't know if that sounds weird, but I don't think I've ever done that.
Vile: No, it only sounds weird when you're making music in this modern world, where you're always trying to get back to that. But with some people, it doesn't even occur to them that's the way it's supposed to be.
Gunn: Yeah, it just felt really simple. Some of the guitar stuff I did was not as complicated as before, and I was like, "Oh, I don't have to force it." We were just doing whole takes and moving on, like the feeling you get from a live recording. What I'm getting at is, it was new to me to not be over-caffeinated and jittery and nervous and sweating and unsure of myself, you know? It just felt like the way that it should—or the way I imagined a lot of the records that I really love were recorded. Like with Dylan or Neil Young, you can just feel that they're all in the studio. I think there's something lost with a lot of music that comes out now because it doesn't have that quality. Not to get too nostalgic.

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This Is Us

Dream Theater's John Petrucci *and* ***John Myung*** *embrace raw tones and spontaneous ideas on the band's latest album,* Distance Over Time.

BY PAUL KOBYLENSKY

Photo by Mark Maryanovich

Dream Theater circa 2019 (above, from left to right): keyboardist Jordan Rudess, bassist John Myung, vocalist James LaBrie, guitarist John Petrucci, and drummer Mike Mangini. Myung and Petrucci formed the band in 1985 with drummer Mike Portnoy, when they were all students at Berklee College of Music. Portnoy left Dream Theater in 2010 and was replaced by Mangini. "If the ideas are strong, if the chemistry is working, and everybody is on the same page, then it's undeniable," says Petrucci of the current lineup.

The Astonishing, Dream Theater's 2016 concept album, was a massive undertaking, even by their standards. Crafting the rock opera was a challenge: The band had to create the concept, write the story, compose and record the music, and track full orchestras and choirs. Then they had to find a way to present the spectacle on tour with full story line and video accompaniment. But masterfully helmed from the start by guitarist John Petrucci and keyboardist Jordan Rudess, the album and world tour were a magnificent success.

As if that weren't enough, the band hit the road again to commemorate the anniversary of their 1992 breakthrough album, *Images and Words*. So how did Dream Theater finally come down from the creative whirlwind of the last few years? "My two eldest graduated from college and we took a much-needed family vacation," says Petrucci. "But I also did two legs with G3 in the U.S. and Europe."

When Dream Theater reconvened to record their latest album, *Distance Over Time*, each member knew it was time for a back-to-basics approach. Intent on relaxing and discovering what a stripped-back Dream Theater sounded like more than three decades after its inception, the band—which also consists of vocalist James LaBrie, bassist John Myung, and drummer Mike Mangini—found a beautiful but undisclosed location in upstate New York. The original plan was to enjoy communal time writing and connecting as the long-time friends they are. But fate had other plans.

As Myung recalls, "It was like, 'Man, we don't want to leave this place and go into Manhattan just to have the whole vibe change. Let's just stay here.' So that's what we did. We recorded the whole album there."

While you might assume a scenic getaway with great friends and a more laid-back approach might tame the band's sound, one spin through the resulting offering reveals quite the opposite. By stripping away the layers of orchestrations, overdubs, and studio techniques that defined the last album, *Distance Over Time* emerges as what may be the most immediate and sonically direct album of Dream Theater's lauded career.

Or as Petrucci succinctly puts it, "This is what Dream Theater sounds like."

From the moment the opening track, "Untethered Angel," confronts your eardrums, it's clear what he means. While songs like "Room 137," "Barstool Warrior," and "Paralyzed" display the band's trademark moves, it's the album's rawness, the clarity and character of Myung's bass, and the power of Petrucci's straightforward tones that truly elevate this effort.

Gearing up to embark on yet another relentless tour, Myung and Petrucci were happy to give *Premier Guitar* a peek behind the curtain that surrounds *Distance Over Time*. The conversation, like the synergistic nature of their playing, reveals a confident and inspired Dream Theater that's more powerful and unified than ever.

TIDBIT

Guitarist John Petrucci produced the band's 14th studio album, Distance Over Time. *"It was all of us together as a band writing, hanging out, coming up with all the ideas—everybody contributing equally and really being a part of it," he says.*

***Distance Over Time* diverges quite a bit from *The Astonishing*, both sonically and artistically. What was different about the process this time?**
John Petrucci: It was a completely different approach. *The Astonishing* was conceptual, story-driven. We had a ton of orchestration with an orchestra and choir. Jordan and I wrote it and everybody recorded it. So it was not as inclusive of an experience for the band. This time, it was quite the opposite. It was all of us together as a band writing, hanging out, coming up with all the ideas—everybody contributing equally and really being a part of it. It was a lot more organic.

What inspired that approach?
John Myung: I think we were just looking forward to spending time in an environment like in the early days. It was important to not be in a full-on studio environment, which can be a bit clinical. So, it was nice connecting without any of that pressure. We just connected on a different plane.

John [Petrucci], you've produced several of the last few albums, yet each has a distinct sonic quality. What's the trick to getting such a fresh sound after playing and writing together for so long?
Petrucci: First of all, I don't want to give too much importance to that. It's just a title. We just make sure we stay on track and do what we talked about doing. With *Distance Over Time*, we said, "Let's make an organic-sounding record. Let's keep it heavy. Let's have fun. Let's keep it sounding like we're playing live and capture the energy that we have as a band." Inevitably, somebody needs to figure out what the best way is to do that. So, that's my job. But there's so much talent in the band that it happens very naturally.

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- Ernie Ball Music Man Majesty Baritone BFR
- Taylor V-Class acoustic
- Custom Gypsy-jazz acoustic

AMPS

- Mesa/Boogie JP-2C 60/100-watt head
- Mesa/Boogie Rectifier 4x12 with Celestion Vintage 30s

EFFECTS

- Dunlop JP95 Cry Baby wah
- TC Electronic Dreamscape multi-effects pedal
- TC Electronic TC2290-DT desktop-controlled plug-in

STRINGS, PICKS & ACCESSORIES

- Dunlop Flow 2 mm
- Ernie Ball RPS Slinky .010–.046 (6-string)
- Ernie Ball RPS Slinky .010–.056 (7-string)

BUY THE GEAR

"Maybe it's this prog-metal technical presentation," says John Petrucci of Dream Theater's music, "but within that are all of the elements of songwriting we really pay close attention to. Without that, you really don't have anything. Just a bunch of notes."

Photo by Ken Settle

Myung: It definitely needs a leader when you have five people.

How did you go about accomplishing that on the album?
Petrucci: We recorded live demos as we wrote. This is what the band sounds like when we play together. We wanted to capture that in a bottle. It's not a million overdubs, it's not additional strings, or anything. This is the closest to hearing what Dream Theater sounds like when it's just five guys playing and singing.
Myung: The important part is making decisions as a band. It's the chemistry. It's five people and how they connect the ideas. That's what yields really interesting songs, when we're on that plane.
Petrucci: John's right. If the ideas are strong, and if the chemistry is working, and everybody is on the same page, then it's undeniable.

Each musician in Dream Theater is such a monumental talent. When you write, do you write to the specific players or is the song the only focus? Are you conscious of what your fans are expecting?
Myung: All of the above. You don't want to write something that alienates people who expect a certain thing from us. But you're also not really concerned with all of that, because then you'll never get anything done. It's just basically, if it feels right. If it isn't happening, then we'll break it back open and start to work on it again.
Petrucci: Exactly. There's definitely something to be said for being a band and knowing each other for as long as we have. Like in the case of "Untethered Angel," John came in with a bass riff, and I said to him, "I'd love to hear that in a different tuning, maybe in a lower register. Let me just try that." And it morphs into something different. There's a lot of trust that goes back and forth.

Dream Theater has always put a large focus on composition and "the song." How are you able to balance that with the pyrotechnics that fans demand?
Petrucci: The song is the most important thing, at the end of the day. If the song isn't

> "It's not a million overdubs, it's not additional strings, or anything. This is the closest to hearing what Dream Theater sounds like when it's just five guys playing and singing."
> —John Petrucci

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V40 Deluxe

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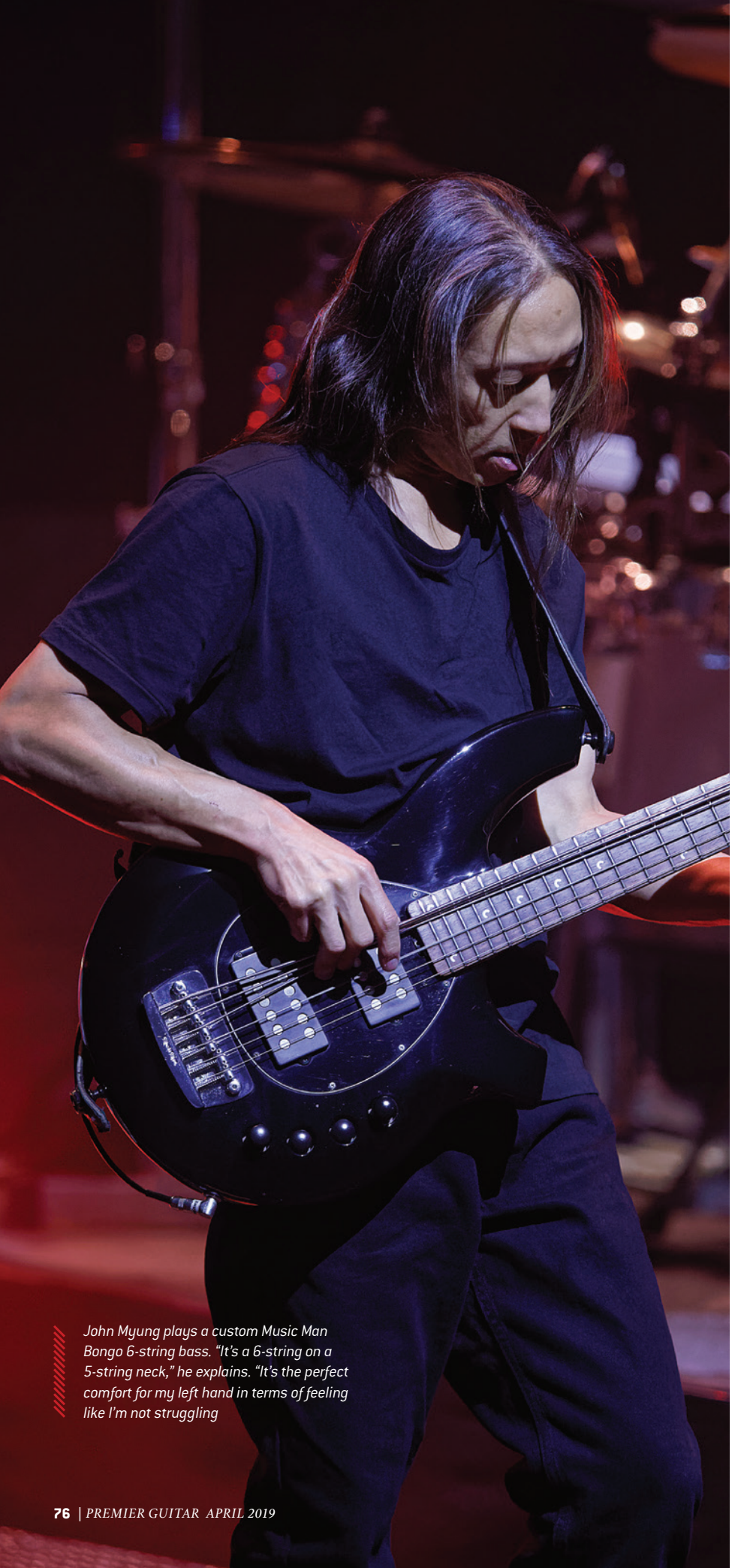

John Myung plays a custom Music Man Bongo 6-string bass. "It's a 6-string on a 5-string neck," he explains. "It's the perfect comfort for my left hand in terms of feeling like I'm not struggling

Photo by Ken Settle

JOHN MYUNG'S GEAR

BASS

- Custom Ernie Ball Music Man 6-string Bongo with 5-string neck

AMPS

- Ashdown ABM-1200 head
- Neve Shelford Channel Z (for direct recording)

STRINGS

- Ernie Ball Slinky Cobalt 5-string set (.045–.130) with added .032 for high-C string

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there—the meaning, the message, the melody, the drive, and the passion—if that's weak, there's no hiding it. It doesn't matter how technically good you are. Maybe it's this prog-metal technical presentation, but within that are all of the elements of songwriting we really pay close attention to. Without that, you really don't have anything. Just a bunch of notes.

Years ago, you were asked about how you continue to improve your craft. You said you enjoy writing things that are beyond your technique, which forces you to improve. Is that still something you do?
Petrucci: Absolutely. In fact, I did that on this record. I'm very scared to figure out what the hell I did! Something that's wonderful about being in a studio is you can take the time to come up with stuff that's pushing your level. For me, it has to stay interesting. I always have to think of different things that I didn't do before. But from a technical perspective, it's literally grabbing my guitar, transcribing what I did, and trying to remember what the fingering was or the technique I used. It really is the key to becoming better.

What's an example of that on the new album?
Petrucci: There's a bunch of stuff. I did a solo in the song "S2N," where I don't know what

the hell I did. I had some crazy moments and some wacky stuff on "Pale Blue Dot" that's just insane, precision and speed-wise. There are a lot of guitar solos in this album, which is fun for me. So those moments are all over the record.

John [Myung], how has this album pushed your playing?
Myung: In my case, it's the tools. It's the different basses that I've played over the years. And it's the experimentations over the past 10 years with getting the 6-string [Music Man] Bongo to a point where I'm really happy with it. It's about evolving as a player, but also being able to evolve because I feel that my instrument is getting better.

There's always been a real musical connection with Music Man basses and my playing, because I have a very heavy and percussive attack. I come from a school of players like Geddy Lee and Steve Harris, and that noise element is part of the sound. Of all the basses I've played, it's only the Music Man that gave my style justice.

What's different about your Music Man Bongos than stock versions?
Myung: It's a 6-string on a 5-string neck. It seems like it's the perfect comfort for my left hand in terms of feeling like I'm not struggling. That was a breakthrough: being a 6-string player and being able to have something I could grasp and that actually felt comfortable. And that also translates into the musicality of it. If I'm more comfortable behind it, everything just flows better.

You've been working on that instrument for a long time. Are we ever going to see a Music Man John Myung signature model?
Myung: You know, I've frequently been asked that over the years, and I can actually say we're all working on something. So the answer to that question is, yes.

I rarely hear bass so clear and so full of character on heavy records. Aside from the bass, how did you go about getting that sound?
Myung: Well, our engineer Jimmy T (James Meslin) is probably a big reason for that. Working with a new engineer on this record, I was willing to break from the traditional recording gear that I have. One of the things we used was called the Neve Shelford Channel. That was the main sound, in terms of getting a really pure tone. And then for amp tones, we just miked up an Ashdown—the ABM series. And that sounded great too. It just gave us what we wanted to hear without having to mess around with the knobs. So, it's really just those two things: the Neve and the Ashdown. It really made a difference in this album.

Did you get the grind right from the amp?
Myung: Yeah. But the grind is also attack-driven. It's how much energy is being created from the hand. It had that breadth of dynamic, where you can really lay in to it. You can play hard and it fattens up in the low end and it pushes and grinds. And if you back off, it cleans up and gets more subtle. So that's the magic. There was a sense of space as the sound is moving rather than being non-responsive. I can't deal with a non-responsive bass sound.
Petrucci: If I can say, this is an amazing bass record. Really. For bass players, you can really hear what he's doing. He just kills it. And that goes back to that producer hat thing. We really wanted the bass to have a voice. It was, "Let's make sure we get the best bass sound we can when we're tracking. Let's make sure when it's being mixed that we let [mix engineer] Ben Grosse know we want the bass to be featured." When the bass is out front like that, it's amazing. Something like "S2N," "Pale Blue Dot," even "Untethered Angel" ... what he's playing on bass just sounds so cool. And it's really exposed in a nice way. In fact, I didn't record any rhythm guitar tracks when it's a guitar solo, so it just sounds like it would if we're playing live. If I go to play a solo, a lot of the orchestration is just bass, drums, and piano.

A great example of that is "Untethered Angel." You and Jordan are playing harmonized lines, and it opens up and lets the bass breathe so much. It also elevates the lines you and Jordan are playing.
Petrucci: It doesn't get more naked than that! There's a drum groove, John is doing a Steve Harris thing, and the guitar and keyboard are left and right and very dry. You hear everything so clear. And that's what I've been getting at with the whole direction of this record. We want people to hear what Dream Theater sounds like when we play. This is us.

That's apparent as soon as you put on the album. It really highlights your individual performances and tones.

> "We're all older now, and I think we're at a point where the best stuff is yet to be written."
> —John Myung

Petrucci: But how do you get that? You just record everything pure. You don't add anything. It's just John's bass. There's no extra stuff going on. It's just my guitar plugged into my amp. It's just Jordan playing the organ. That's how you get it.

Dream Theater is known for its relationships with instrument manufacturers. So is it safe to assume that the album was tracked with your Music Man signature guitars and Mesa Boogie JP-2C amps?
Petrucci: Yes. This whole record was my Mesa/Boogie signature. It's a dream come true for me. The Mark IIC+ was the holy grail Boogie that came out in the '80s. It's on *Master of Puppets* and everything. Then, finally, I convinced them to do a reissue and we made it into my signature head. So not only is it a bona fide reissue, but we modernized it as well. So, it does everything it could possibly need to do.

My guitars on the record are mostly the Majesty plugged straight into my JP-2C. And that's it. If I plugged my guitar into that amp, cranked it, and we looked at each other, like, "Holy shit, that tone is *unbelievable*," then it's the engineer's job to capture it. Put a mic on it and make it sound like that coming out of the monitors. And for the first time, we added a little bit of room mic.

You said you that you mostly used the Majesty. Were there any other guitars that you leaned on for specific parts?
Petrucci: Yeah. There's the Majesty 6-string and 7-string on the album. And for two songs—"Paralyzed" and the one ballad on the album, "Out of Reach," it's the baritone tuned to B♭.

In the past, you've relied on a 1x12 cabinet for a super-tight sound in the studio. Was that the approach you took on this album?
Petrucci: For this one, we all brought all of our live touring gear. I had my two Boogie Recto 4x12s cranking. Ask John, it was really loud. [*Laughs.*] We literally said, "All right, just mike this." That's the sound.

And then I use my signature Dunlop wah. I'm biased, but the best one they've ever made is my JP95. And obviously, I've had the

relationship with TC Electronic for a long time and I used my signature Dreamscape pedal. Another cool thing we used a lot is TC's 2290-DT plug-in with the desktop controller. The 2290 was always a staple in all of my rigs, all my big refrigerator racks. And the plug-ins really sound true and authentic. So we ended up getting Ben Grosse one, and he used it on the mix. Whenever you hear a chorus and a guitar, that's what it is.

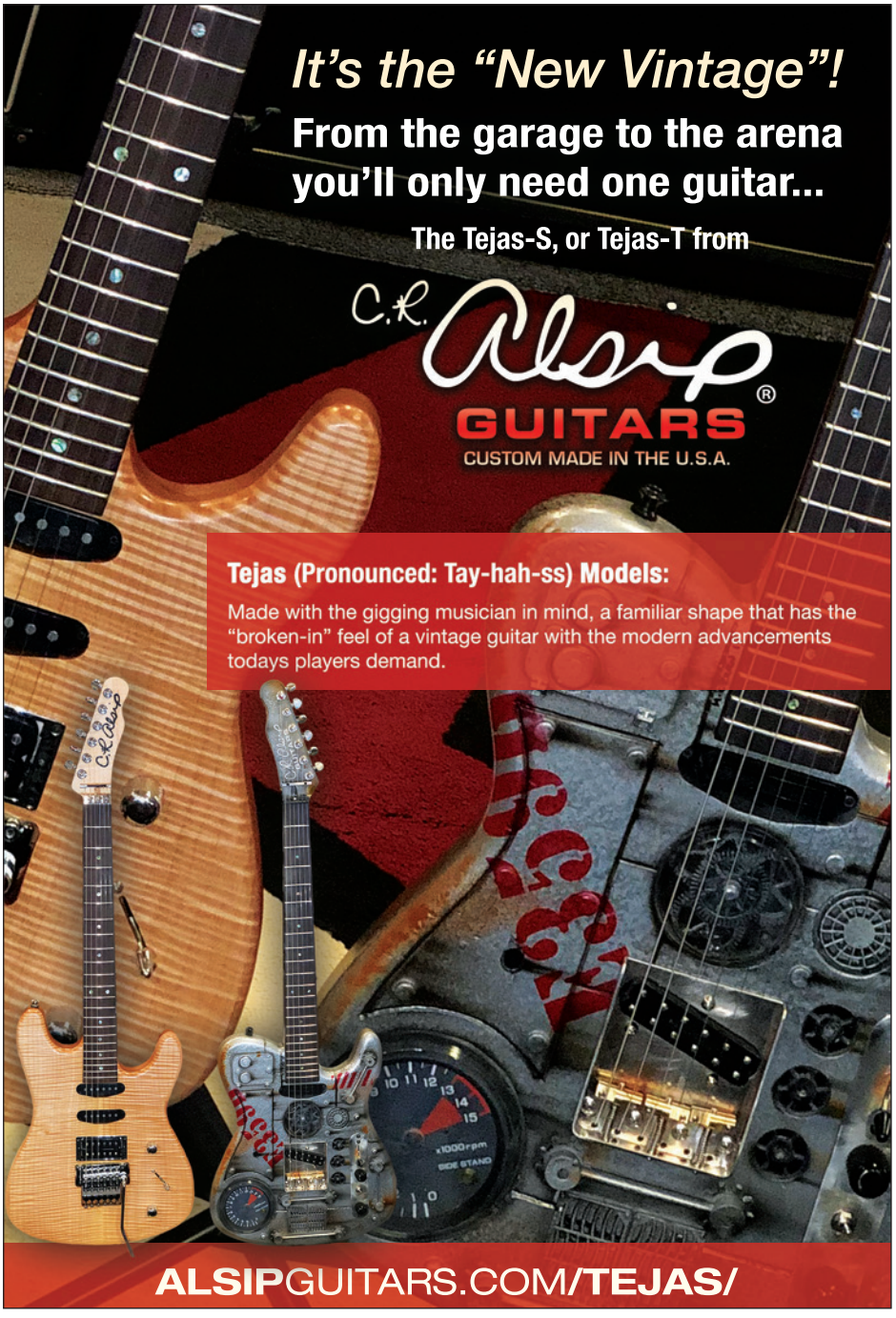
Acoustic guitar plays an unheralded role in Dream Theater, yet it has always been an important part of your sound. What acoustics do you track with?
Petrucci: I played a new Taylor acoustic they sent me with their new V-bracing system. And for the first time, on "Fall into the Light," there's an acoustic break that I doubled with a Gypsy-jazz guitar made by a German luthier.

Progressive rock, and especially progressive metal, rarely finds its way into the mainstream, yet it remains a vibrant scene. Why do you think that is?
Petrucci: That's funny because it wasn't always like that. When we started, the only band we'd get compared to was Rush. But fast forward, now there is a prog-metal scene. It's adventurous. It's fun. It's challenging. There's this sense of pushing yourself. And it's a bit rebellious, as well. There's a little bit of pride about being able to play a certain way and come up with wacky stuff that makes people smile and pull up their seats.

You listen to Animals as Leaders, and it's like, "What the hell is he doing there?" And with my nephew, Jake [Bowen], and his band Periphery, it's developing into a scene with a lot of different offshoots. Who knows how far it can go? People are just taking it in all different directions and there are no rules or limitations.

"Progressive" also serves as a great description of the Dream Theater legacy. Every album and every tour has been another step forward. So what's left for Dream Theater to accomplish?
Myung: Well, I think the greatest thing about music is that it's infinite. We're all older now, and I think we're at a point where the best stuff is yet to be written. It's like the years of experience adds to the ability to create something more powerful. I think you enter a zone where it's possible to write and do some of the best stuff that you've ever done. It's a gift. It doesn't feel exhausted in any way. I think the best is yet to come.

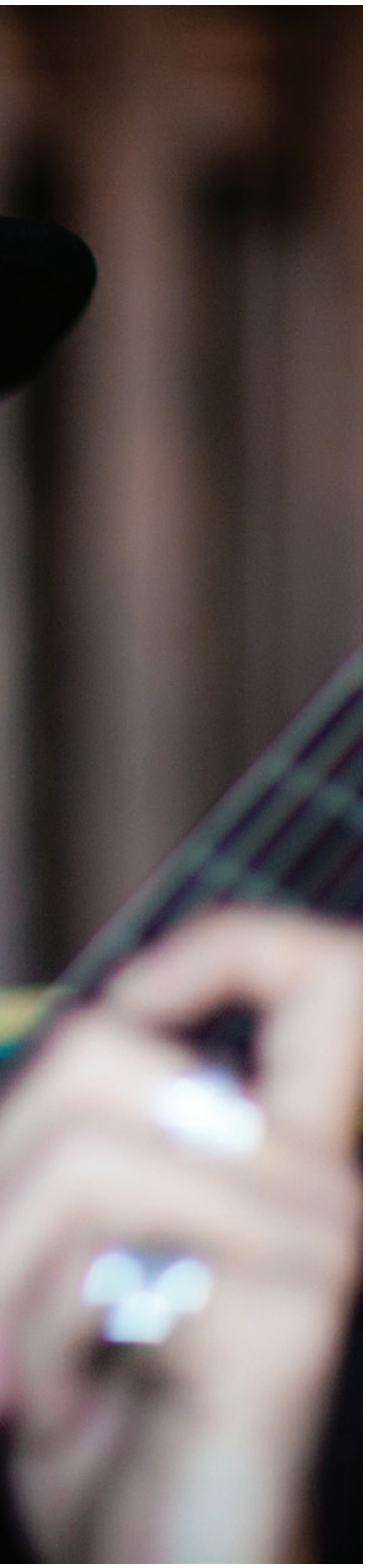
With everything you've accomplished, you guys are still looking up.
Petrucci: Yeah! It makes us smile every day. We love it.



CHARLIE SEXTON'S BIGGER PICTURE

From honing his chops on Austin's blues circuit with the Vaughan brothers at age 12, to playing on sessions with rock's elite as a teenager, to a longtime gig with Bob Dylan, to producing records, and a recent film role as Townes Van Zandt, the guitarist has traveled an expansive musical circle.

BY TESSA JEFFERS



As a kid growing up in Texas, Charlie Sexton had an unlikely babysitter in none other than Stevie Ray Vaughan. A family friend to Sexton's single mother, the story goes that SRV played Hendrix records for young Charlie and his brother, Will, to keep them occupied while their mom was at work. As Sexton got older and started frequenting the tiny clubs in Austin's blues circuit, SRV trusted budding guitarist "Little Charlie" to fill in for him onstage.

This is but a minor footnote in the musical life of Sexton, who is well-known as Bob Dylan's lead guitarist. (Sexton first joined Dylan's band in 1999, and still tours and plays on his studio albums.) Charlie grew up playing the blues with the Vaughan brothers and, by age 12, was slinging licks and learning the ropes with other Austin legends like W.C. Clark and Joe Ely. At the ripe age of 16, Charlie scored a solo record deal and a hit, in 1985, with "Beat's So Lonely," a song from his first album, *Pictures for Pleasure*. At the time, *The New York Times* described him as a teen heartthrob in the vein of David Bowie, another icon who Sexton ended up working with later.

Sexton was in his late teens when high-profile artists started calling on him to play guitar on their sessions. "The first year I started doing anything professionally, one session was with Sparks, and then it was Don Henley, and then it was Keith Richards and Ron Wood," Sexton remembers. "Shortly after that it was David Bowie and Dylan, so that's a pretty crazy combo. That's like a year-and-a half of my life, 40 years ago or something [*laughs*]."

All the while, he was playing in his own bands: most notably the Arc Angels with Double Trouble's rhythm session and Doyle Bramhall II. Because Sexton could play styles running the gamut from his blues beginnings to pop, country, rock or whatever in between, it was hard to place him in a specific niche. He refers to his sphere of influences as a "triangle thing."

"There's this confusion of what I do and who I am or whatever," Sexton says. "It's also based on my own listening habits, which I think are shared with a lot of people. I call it the Wednesday-Saturday-Sunday thing. I listen to some records on Wednesday, some on Saturday, and on Sunday it's something completely different. That's where that triangle thing comes from."

Dynamic is an understatement for Sexton, who plays many instruments besides guitar, including piano, drums, bass, and orchestral strings. He's in his element when providing the atmosphere and musical glue for a kaleidoscope of projects. In addition to working with Dylan and making his own solo recordings, he's produced albums for Jimmie Vaughan, Lucinda Williams, Edie Brickell, and Ryan Bingham. He just wrapped a stint playing on the Bowie Celebration tour, and holds a lifetime position as musical director for Austin's Music Awards.

In 2018, he starred as Townes Van Zandt in the Ethan Hawke film *Blaze*, a biopic about unsung Texas outlaw troubadour Blaze Foley, who is played in the movie by actor-musician Ben Dickey. Sexton's portrayal of the real-life icon provides the vehicle for telling the story of Foley's life, through a series of flashbacks. Van Zandt, who also came to a tragic end, was one of Foley's closest friends. Sexton (who also oversaw the movie's musical production) is mesmerizing onscreen. His performance captivates with haunting authenticity—it feels like Sexton is Van Zandt.

Blaze is based on the memoir *Living in the Woods in a Tree: Remembering Blaze Foley* by Sybil Rosen, who was Foley's muse and a firsthand witness to the songwriter's life. The entire *Blaze* project had a synergy fueled by a love for music, and Hawke, Sexton, and Dickey's onscreen partnership and real-life friendships continued after the film wrapped. Sexton and Hawke recently launched a record label with Louis Black, called SexHawkeBlack, and Sexton produced Dickey's new record, *A Glimmer on the Outskirts*, which is the first release for the label.

In real life, Blaze Foley was known for being drunk and violent, but his tender side is revealed through the lens of his lover, Rosen. The film's raw telling of the tortured artist's struggle and demise ain't pretty, but it's a testament to the idea that no one is definable by one quality—a sentiment Sexton has embodied in his decades-long career.

In this interview, Sexton discusses how he started, the guitarists who greatly influenced his own playing ("meeting Jimmie Vaughan was like meeting Elvis"), working with Dylan, details of his favorite guitars, and how he learned to produce. Throughout the conversation, he reveals nuggets of wisdom about the bigger picture of music.

This Collings SoCo Deluxe is Sexton's No. 1 guitar on tour because it stays in tune through the many chord changes of a Dylan set. It has a "dog hair" back and neck finish, a black-finished spruce top, and ThroBak SLE-101 PAF pickups.

TIDBIT

While playing the role of Townes Van Zandt in Blaze, *Charlie Sexton also oversaw the musical production of the film. The soundtrack includes Blaze Foley's most popular tunes like "Clay Pigeons," performed by Ben Dickey, as well as one Van Zandt song, "Marie," performed by Sexton.*

You've been playing guitar since you were a toddler. Can you recall an "aha" moment, where something clicked and you thought, "This is what I'm gonna do for the rest of my life."
That happened really quick. When I was really little I would watch *The Johnny Cash Show* religiously with my grandparents. I remember being at a family reunion at 7 or 8 years old with all my aunts and granny at the VFW, and at the end of it, my uncles got up and played country or gospel tunes or whatever. What it did to them was really powerful. Someone might be in a bad mood, or so and so got divorced, he's cheating and he killed the dog—and all that stuff went away and everyone was moved by what was going on. I thought, "Wow, there's something going on here." It was like a strange magic, the effect it had on everyone. It really came out of necessity with very few opportunities on the horizon in my family. With us, it seemed to be destitute or prison [*laughs*]. And I just loved music. I just kept trying.

Johnny Cash was an idol of yours. Who else?
That was pre-teen. I grew up with the records my mom was listening to: the Beatles, the Stones, Arlo Guthrie was in the house, random '60s music-machine stuff, the birth of garage psychedelia. I started hanging out and getting close to the Vaughans when I was really young. Jimmie Vaughan was probably the real guitar hero I was obsessed with.

Me and my brother, we opened for the Clash, who we met through Joe Ely, who gave me my first break. That was my first real, *real* gig. I came up playing mostly blues. That was the vehicle to play. Once I heard the Sex Pistols, I was like, what the hell is this? And then I became obsessed with Gang of Four and Andy Gill. I was seeking and searching out other things that weren't immediately in front of me.

Is it true that SRV babysat you?
Yeah. I rarely ever played with Stevie, because he'd see me walk in and he'd hand me his guitar and take a break. He was going to get a drink, and he liked me. He was super, super, super sweet. I met Stevie before I met Jimmie, and then I met Jimmie and that was kind of like meeting Elvis.

Who would you say taught you the most about guitar in that time period?
For me, the point by which it all comes out of, like, if you made a map with a pin-drop and it goes out from there, it starts with Jimmie Vaughan. There's something about Jimmie, who could play half the speed of his brother, but the tonal thing that he achieves, even on that first record [1979's *The Fabulous Thunderbirds*]. I always refer to it as his brother is a really fast car, and Jimmie's like a really fine car, like a beautiful old Cadillac with all the right stuff and it's just kinda cruising.

That's where it all comes from, and then I go to back to where he was getting the blues: Jimmy Reed, Freddie King, Albert Collins, Albert King, B.B. King. But then it goes into Frippian land and Earl Slick/Bowie stuff. The main record I tried to teach myself to play guitar to was *Magical Mystery Tour*, which was a nightmare. It's not like the first Beatles album, where you can play the chords. Nothing stays the same within one track. That was exhausting at 9 years old with a crappy acoustic guitar. Guitar in general is pretty frustrating. It's a terrible instrument. It's not supposed to play in tune and nothing is laid out easily like on the piano.

Was playing Townes Van Zandt in *Blaze* a difficult role, having known him and growing up entrenched in the Austin music scene?
Yeah, it was tricky. When Ethan [Hawke] first called me about the project, he asked, "Hey, what do you think about a movie about Blaze?" This was before my actual knowledge of Sybil Rosen's book, which honestly balanced out the whole film. It would've been much different if it was just those two maniacs [Foley and Van Zandt] throughout the whole film [*laughs*]. It was wonderful because it needed that perspective from Sybil's book.

Originally it was daunting. That's the first thing I told him: "Well, those are hard to make, because of the music stuff." There's a bunch of bad music films like that, you know? And he said, "Will you help me put it all together?" And I said, "Yeah, of course." And then he goes, "Well, I also want you to play Townes." And I was like, "Uhhhhh, well that's really terrifying."

Because you knew Townes personally, right?
Well, it's that because I did know him. I'm really good friends with his son. It's a family friend, and it's someone truly iconic, you know?

Did you feel like you had to get the family's blessing?

Photo by Tim Bugbee

That's a whole other issue. The first call I made after that was I called J.T. [Van Zandt], his son and just said, "Hey, good news and bad news. My friend Ethan wants to make a movie about Blaze." He said, "That's awesome! What's the bad news?" I said, "I'm gonna play your daddy." He goes, "Well, that's cool. You know I wouldn't want anyone else but you to do it."

Their blessing is a really tricky thing, because you can't go into something like that to do the work with too much social stuff. Ultimately I knew there were things that were really important that needed to be correct, certain little things about him. But it was gonna be tricky, because he's truly iconic—there's a lot of layers to who that guy was and, in the scheme of things, I didn't really know him. Digging in the holes I found out more things that I didn't necessarily want to. I had to have some sort of personal understanding about maybe what he was going through as a human, which became a little too familiar [*laughs*].

Why did you want to help tell Blaze Foley's story?
There's not really a number one reason—there's a bunch of number ones. The first thing is, I know how much regard and heart that Ethan has if he's even calling me to ask, "What do you think, should I do this?" Because he has such high regard for music and the artistic creative process in those people, he has a lot a love and respect for that. Even though Blaze was horrible. My brother and I had the same experience with Blaze, which wasn't pleasant. As my brother said, "I just love Ben. He showed this other side of Blaze that no one got to see." That's kinda true.

And honestly, for what those guys did with their creative life, there's a million people that don't even have a clue who Blaze was, so I thought it was important to do that for his story. And there's still heaps of people that don't understand or haven't heard what Townes brought. Everyone knew who Buddy Holly was, or Jim Morrison, or whatever, so this was below the radar in a lot of ways for a lot of people. It all worked out really well because I think it showed this other side of Blaze and it keyed people into those songs that both of them had written.

Was the record label you launched with Ethan Hawke and Louis Black something that happened later, after the film wrapped?
That happened completely post. Basically, this project had so much synergy, it was kinda creepy. Once we finished the film, Ethan came to me and said, "I want to give Ben something else besides the film that's his own. Would you be interested in making his record?" I said "Yeah, I'll totally help you do that." Ben sent 20 to 30 songs. The synergy train just kept rolling, with or without us, almost.

What was it like in the studio with Ben Dickey, having already worked on the film and then producing his original music?
It was really easy, really creative, and good. He had decent demos of the songs we were cutting, and it was a really small crew. Ben was so solid. Without it being machine-like, we were just knockin' 'em down. I extracted a dozen songs from a batch of 20 to 30. He had some really great songs. I loved a line he would say when certain lyrics would come up, "Oh yeah, facts." It was really funny, because a lot of it is based on his life living on a cotton field in Louisiana, dealing with nature, storms blowing down barns, hiding in the closet. Ben's a really interesting guy. As Ethan says, you never know who's got an interesting story. He's done everything: been a chef, been a mover, been in bands, been default Clinton campaign security.

How did you get into producing?
It really all began when I first left home. I was 13 and I had a little band, but I also had a side band that I played drums in. We were gonna go in the studio and record songs, and right before we went, the bass player quit. So we cut recordings of the drums and guitars, and then I put bass on it later, and then I started figuring out how to put the rest of the songs together.

I was so interested in records growing up. I was listening to these records that weren't necessarily folk records. It was kind of attached to writing. It was just in my head ... I always heard the whole thing. Sometimes it was difficult to finish a song until I got all the other ideas out of the way so I could focus on lyrics and those kind of things.

Onstage in 2010, Charlie Sexton plays a '60s Italian Eko, while Bob Dylan wrangles a Trussart Steel-O-Matic.

CHARLIE SEXTON'S GEAR

GUITARS

- Collings SoCo Deluxe
- Custom S-Style (with Chandler lipstick pickups, built by Austin Vintage)
- Gibson Ron Wood L-5S
- Trussart Steelcaster
- Trussart Baritone SteelMaster
- '55 Les Paul Custom Black Beauty
- Shyboy T-style
- Gibson Trini Lopez reissue
- Gretsch White Falcon Stephen Stills
- Fraulini Leadbelly 12-String acoustic
- Collings Waterloo acoustic
- Gibson Advanced Jumbo and J-200

AMPS

- Magnatone Varsity Cathedral
- '58 Supro Coronado

EFFECTS

- Electro-Harmonix POG
- TC Electronic Chorus Flanger (modded by Bill Webb of Austin Vintage)
- Fulton-Webb Textosterone
- Durham Sex Drive

So, over the course of years, prior to officially being a producer, I was always making tracks to write songs to. Or if I was cowriting, we'd do a recording of a song. It was kind of the Malcolm Gladwell 10,000-hour concept. Without even focusing on it, I was working on my 10,000 hours of recording and building tracks and figuring out how things worked.

Did you get your 10,000 hours in yet?
I never really got the count. I think you're supposed to know what you're doing by the time you reach it, so maybe I haven't reached it yet because I'm always learning in that regard.

This is what it is: You have to have the balance. What's the balance? Arrested development and always-forward movement and growth. You have to have a certain amount of arrested development that keeps you from giving up [*laughs*]. And then keep working and learning. You kinda stop evolving yet continue to evolve all in the same breath. You just have to know when to send yourself to your room or your corner, ya know? [*Laughs.*]

Besides working with Dylan, what were some of the memorable sessions you've been a part of?
Oddly enough, I learned a lot about guitar from Edie Brickell while producing a record for her. She started taking guitar lessons years ago. She never played that much guitar, but it's in her nature to do it herself and learn. For the first record we did together, genre-wise it was somewhat vast, and I got to see what she learned over years studying with someone. She was fingerpicking a style of acoustic; then she had a batch of songs where she was learning jazz chords. I would go through 40 songs of hers where she was doing things I hadn't really done yet. She's brilliant at coming up with guitar riffs. She's unbelievable. I did two records with her [2003's *Volcano* and 2011's *Edie Brickell*].

When you're in the studio with Dylan, when it comes to guitar parts, do you share ideas?
It all comes from him. Unless you're really a musician and keep your eye on the ball, people don't really understand that. As great of a lyricist and songwriter as he is, his melodic sense and everything about the musical aspect of it is just stunning. I've never, ever worked with anyone who has such constant ideas and fearlessness. He'll take on something and flip it on its ear, its head, whatever and just completely reimagine it. As great as the lyrics are, the other side of it is as stunning. I've learned a lot over the last few years once we started making the standards records—which were five records, about 50 songs with almost 50 chords per song. All those records were done almost completely live. You kinda gotta know it all. Everything comes through that door whether it's orchestral or country or blues or gospel or bluegrass or rock 'n' roll.

If you're at home working on music and writing, is the guitar what you would use as your tool?
Yes and no. Usually it's the piano. The way it's laid out and the fumbling about it is where you come up with voicings and substitutions. It's laid out better than a guitar. If I had the luxury of actually knowing what I was doing, it's all theory. I tend to stumble upon it.

Is there an instrument that you don't play?
Sure! All of 'em [*laughs*].

I've read that you've been working on a three-part project over the years. Have you been working on your own music?
Yes and no. Basically, the three-part thing comes from.... It's a funny thing—who I am depends on who you ask. Years ago, there were two projects I was going to be involved in. On one project they said, "Oh he's not right—he's too country," or something. And then on the other project, they said, "No, he's too pop." Or

Photo by Jordi Vidal

BUY THE GEAR ›

bluesy. It was like depending on what they were aware of ... that's where that whole concept came from. And also it was a bit of a creative trick not to paint myself into a corner, which unfortunately, I spent more than half of my life painted in that corner being on major labels.

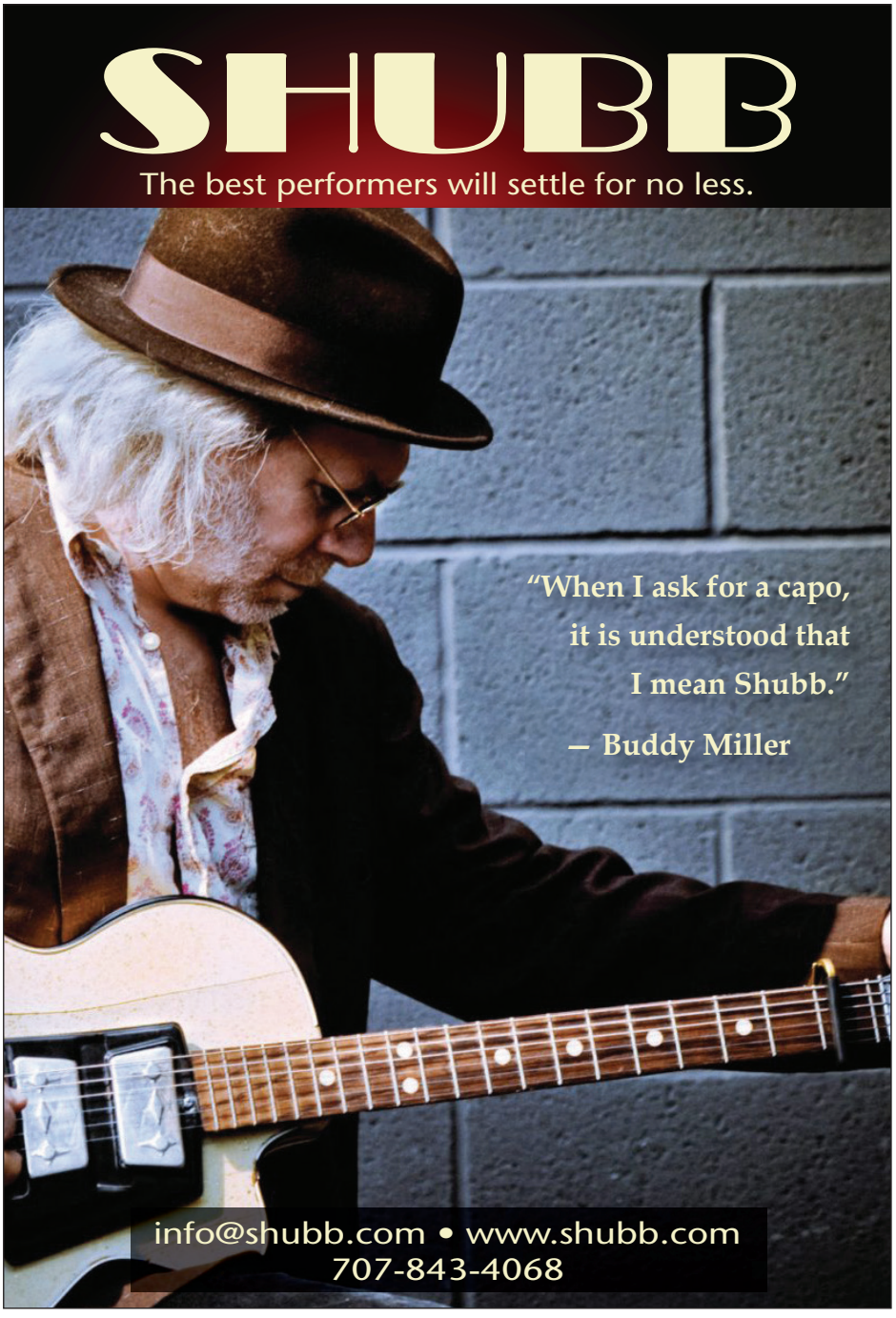
You played a Collings SoCo for a good part of Dylan's last tour. Are you still playing that guitar?
Oh yeah. It's been in the lineup since I started playing with him, really. Particularly on the last five records. It'll play in tune. I became aware of Collings and met Bill [Collings], who brought me into the fold when he was trying to get electrics out there, which was a relatively new inclusion to the line, since he made acoustics for so many years. With so many chord counts, I was having problems with playing in tune. The second I switched over to that guitar, it took that problem away. Bill only made great instruments.

What is the current electric guitar that you play the most?
There have been some changes, since on this tour we have to do standards. On the previous tour it was 90 percent the Collings. The basic lineup of what's in the rack is what's been there, except for two new things that showed up. I have a lipstick Stratocaster, built by my friends at Austin Vintage. It has Chandler lipstick pickups, and is a copy of my main Arc Angels guitar. Then I have a Glaser B-Bender Tele, a Trussart Tele, a Burst Brothers '58 reissue Les Paul that's 10 years old, and a '55 Les Paul Black Beauty.

I have two new things that showed up last year: a gold Shyboy Tele, based on the original Tele Snakehead design with no pickguard and a different volume. And the Ron Wood L-5 model. They only made 20 of this certain one back then, and Keith Richards bought two and kept one and gave one to Woody.

We were just in Tokyo and we went to this place we always go that has tons of Gibsons. I'm like the tester. Everyone says, "play this one." They had the Woody guitar, and I saw it and remembered that Gibson released it. I plugged it in at the very end after I played umpteenth guitars for everyone. So I've been playing it *a lot* over the last two tours. It's odd looking and it's not a very common guitar. But it's really great. My tech makes fun of me: "It's kinda like that banjo guitar that Bela Fleck has." Which led to him immediately photoshopping my face and superimposing it to Bela Fleck's body [*laughs*].

What are some of your favorite guitars that you play at home?
There's a crazy, cool guitar we actually got at the same shop in Japan. A signature model Les Paul Jr. goldtop that has a pickguard that looks like the one on Scotty Moore's guitar. It looks like a Billy Gibbons guitar. Then there's one of my Trussarts in a Jazzmaster



SMELLS LIKE RASPBERRIES

When Charlie Sexton and Ben Dickey starred in Blaze, *the two guitarists formed a bond they carried into the studio. Sexton produced Dickey's new album,* A Glimmer on the Outskirts. *An astute songwriter and guitarist in his own right, Dickey told* PG *his intention was to make an album that "provides a notion of hope and wonder." Here, Dickey discusses the project through the lens of guitar.*

What's your and Charlie's relationship like?
When Ethan and I first talked about who was going to be Townes Van Zandt, I was like, "Charlie, without a doubt." He'll take care of all these people in the story and, lo and behold, what I didn't really know is that he took care of me.

I've known who Charlie was since I was a kid. I read about him in a guitar magazine. I remember reading, "This young man was playing with Stevie Ray Vaughan when he was 12 or 13, and he played with Jerry Lee Lewis." At the time he'd just finished playing with Bowie and I remember thinking to myself, "Shit, that dude is way ahead of me!" [*Laughs*.] Because I wanted to be a young guitarslinger, too. I wanted to be out in the world writing songs. When he joined Dylan's band, I remember thinking, "Fuck, Bob Dylan gets *everybody*." I was very, very keen on who Charlie was and I followed his career.

We became fast friends. I've always admired his musicianship, but he's a wonderful person. We didn't talk about making an album until much, much later after the movie was totally finished. I was over the moon! When I sent the demos, I was nervous. When he wrote me back that he liked them, I was excited.

We never rehearsed with the band. Charlie totally produced those moments. My heart swelled. It was incredible watching him work. He's an incredible guitar player, but he's a musician top to bottom. I learned so much from him just watching and listening. Every time I'm around him I tap him to tell me why XYZ and he helps. He's also someone who's still learning and he doesn't hide that.

How did you approach guitar on the album? Were the parts written beforehand?
My demos had all the parts written, but I wasn't married to any of them. Most of Charlie's leads are not note for note my stuff. He's paying ode to the demo but he's doing his Charlie Sexton magic so he's doing his own thing. There are specific runs I needed coming in and out, but otherwise I told the band to just play in the spirit of it. There was never a moment where I was like "don't do that," because everyone was so good.

How much was Charlie playing leads?
He plays 80 to 85 percent of the guitar on the record. He will tell people, "If you go listen to the demos, that's pretty much what Ben's doing." There's a mild map for what I was intending to do, but Charlie went off on his own thing.

What's your favorite guitar?
My grandfather passed away when I was 10, but he gave me my first guitar. He gave me this black 1935 Gibson L-30 with white trim. He would let me play it under supervision, but he got terminal cancer. He very ceremoniously took me in the den one day. He was a very eloquent man. His words were: "I'm not going to be here much longer and I know you know that and it's hard to talk about, but I want to give this guitar to you. This is yours now and you need to take care of it." To me, that felt, in my young brain and to this day, like a very Excalibur-ish moment. This guitar is magic, my grandad is magic, this thing will take me places. It was a little bit of a life raft, too. My folks got divorced and we had some rough times and I clung to the guitar pretty tight.

I still use that color motif. Now I have a 1988 Gibson Chet Atkins Country Gentleman that's black with white trim, and Gibson sent me these new ES-235s in black with white trim. It all goes back to my grandad.

Were there any guitars that Charlie had that you used in the sessions for the album?
He has a black with white trim Trini Lopez that was used on most of the leads.

I heard that you started putting acrylic on your nails for playing. Do you still do that?
I do. I picked that up from Charlie. They're pretty strange, but they don't break, man.

Every time I play guitar with him, I learn something. There's little truths about guitars that guitar players know, like where your hand is on an acoustic guitar will make different sounds close to the bridge. I know those to degrees but, watching him play and what he applies . . . . I used one pick my whole life. He uses all sorts of picks applied to the song and I've never thought about it that way. The Country Gentleman is the first guitar I've played that has a master volume, and I had an epiphany with that.

Being with Charlie, there are so many more routes to take and branches to understand and ways to get things out of different instruments. The track "Sing That One to Me" has a unison acoustic thing, and I was listening to him accent different strumming patterns. I realized the effect of what he was doing made it swing. His ears are hearing 20 different options at once, and he knows how to draw the ones that turn things on their head or provide a different rhythm.

Compared to working on the movie, how was the studio dynamic different or the same?
It was different, because you'd be hard pressed to find me when I was making the movie. I was somewhere else. Blaze and Townes were there.

I guess I became keen of other parts of what it means to be in an ensemble. You have a voice. Most of what I'm doing on *Glimmer on the Outskirts* is playing these two Gibson ES-235s that I love that I got in 2017. That's what my voice was on this album. I was really using what I learned from the movie set. These two guitars are my voice, then everybody else has a different voice. They're so similar, the processes, they really are.

If your music had an odor, what would yours smell like?
Haha! That's a great question. I'm gonna say mine would probably be the smell of the [cannabis] flower mixed with raspberries and lilies. I say raspberries because I read that the entire universe smells like raspberries. It's based in science that when supernovas happen, the remnant gases that burn off lead to a very sweet smell. That's exciting, right?

Photo by Rett Peek

style that we added a third pickup to and just converted it to a baritone, and it's *amazing*. I'm babysitting a '53 goldtop Les Paul that's amazing. I used it all over Ryan Bingham's record. We needed a slicey-sounding overdub guitar and it became the one.

Do you still play your Sex Drive pedal a lot?
Oh yeah, it's always there. That's the first thing that gets hit on the board. Then I'm using those Magnatone Varsitys, which I think I'm one of the few people that actually use. But it's amazing.

When Ted [Kornblum] first introduced the line again, he brought everything down to a gig and the Varsity Cathedral was my favorite-sounding amp in the line. It looks like an old radio. People ask, "What is that behind you, a record player or something?" No, they're amps! [*Laughs*.]

If music had an odor, what would yours smell like?
Oh my god. A lingering scent in the kitchen. Maybe it's not very appetizing, but it's maybe that strange buffet of New York where they have everything, but I'm hoping it's better than that, unless prone to food poisoning [*laughs*].

What's one of your favorite Dylan songs to play on the tour right now?
There's this side of him where he does these sort of balladeer, crooner, creepy songs. The irony of him, with all of the discussion and debates about his singing, is he's an amazing balladeer. Those songs are so fetching because he's a wonderful singer and the phrasing.... I enjoy those a lot. Rock is a trap. It's a big trap, where most people that think they're really rocking—they aren't. It's like, "no stop it." I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that roll has been excluded from the equation.

That works both ways, because if you just have the roll...
Yeah. That's the way I look at making records. There's not just one frequency. Your cat may scratch you and bite you, but it'll also sit in your lap and let you pet it.

Magnificent Obsession

***Rush's Geddy Lee** talks about his bass-collecting odyssey—the perils of instrument hunting, the book it inspired, his favorite axes and their sounds, and the people who made and played them.*

WRITTEN BY DAVID VON BADER
PHOTOS BY RICHARD SIBBALD

Last year, after four decades of touring and recording, prog-rock giants Rush came to a halt following Neil Peart's retirement from drumming. While the trio remain close friends, and bassist and frontman Geddy Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson haven't ruled out the prospect of further collaboration, each of Rush's members are currently living life as a solo act.

Lee is a voracious collector of everything from wines to baseball ephemera, and over the past decade has increasingly turned that interest toward vintage bass guitars. The virtuoso says he initially set out with the modest intention of chasing down nice examples of the instruments wielded by his musical heroes: a '62 Fender Jazz bass like John Paul Jones used in Led Zeppelin, a Gibson EB-3 like Jack Bruce's in Cream, and so on. However, Lee is afflicted with the curse of the completest, and his curiosity grew with the purchase of each old instrument. Questions about the evolution of particular models and the spaces they occupied in the relatively short history of the electric bass led Lee deeper down the rabbit hole.

Eventually, Lee, who had previously only purchased basses as tools to create music, amassed a collection of over 250 vintage examples. Next came the idea to document his incredible collection and passion for the instrument in a book. Thus, *Geddy Lee's Big Beautiful Book of Bass* was published in December 2018. The volume features world-class photos and notes about the basses in Lee's collection, interviews with some of the celebrated players that shaped his musical world—including John Paul Jones and the Rolling Stones' Bill Wyman, and showcases Lee's transition from collector to archeologist of the bass.

Premier Guitar spoke with Lee over the phone as he relaxed at home in Toronto with his beloved Norwich Terriers. The conversation covered Lee's passion for collecting and his new book, some of the rare instruments he's now the custodian of, the challenges of Rush's music, and what the future may hold for him as a player.

Geddy Lee reads a naptime story to his Norwich Terriers as they all relax in front of part of the colorful menagerie of basses in his Toronto home.

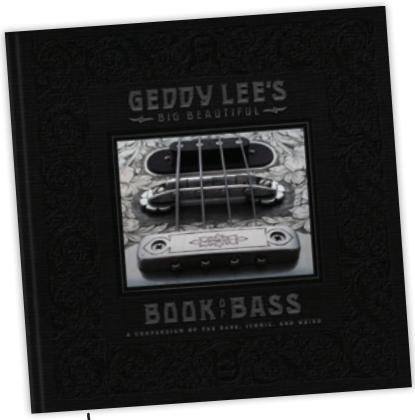
The collection of basses you've put together is pretty astounding.

It was no small task, and it was sort of a crash course for me. Considering that I've been playing for over 42 years, I probably should've known half of this stuff, but collecting vintage wasn't really my thing. The whole vintage thing came to me over the last, maybe, 10 years. Prior to that, I was only looking at my instruments as tools to get me the sounds and playability that I needed to have onstage and in the studio.

When I was a kid, I collected stamps, and then when I got turned on to music, I had a big vinyl collection and I was pretty fanatical about that. Over the years, I got into first edition books, baseball stuff, and then there's the wine "issue," but the bass collecting and this book really felt like the first time that I was paying something back to the instrument that's given me my entire life. It was a project that not only edified me in terms of what the world of instruments was like between 1950 and 1980, but it also was kind of a full circle for me as the first *good* instrument I ever bought was a 1968 Fender.

Was there a particular bass that catalyzed your transition from player to collector?

Yeah. The first instrument I bought as a collector was a '53 Fender P bass, and I wanted that because it's my birth year. Collectors seem to look for stuff from their birth year as a kind of ego thing. I guess everyone wants to celebrate their own entry into the world, right? So that's where it started for me and that was a very important piece because, in researching that piece, I learned how early 1953 *really* was for the electric bass, having only been invented as a commercially available thing in '51. That bass really got me thinking about that period, and, as a collector, it's access to a window into history that really gets me motivated. Through that, I started learning about Leo [Fender] and



TIDBIT

For Geddy Lee's Big Beautiful Bass Book, *he interviewed bassists like Bill Wyman and John Paul Jones who could talk with authority about buying basses during certain periods.*

When Lee began collecting basses, he set out to acquire about a dozen examples of those instruments preferred by his idols, with this Hofner 500-1, for example, representing Beatles-era Paul McCartney.

I started being very interested in the changes that happened in the first 10 years of the P bass, because from '51 to '61 that instrument went through a lot of changes as Leo tweaked and looked for the ideal version of the Precision bass. Those early iterations and the modifications he made are interesting not only in learning about that instrument, but also learning about what made Leo Fender tick. Suffice to say Leo's a fairly interesting character in the history of vintage instruments. That was one aspect that really got me turned on, and then I started casting my gaze to other instruments.

Ever since I started using my '72 Fender Jazz bass as my main stage instrument in the early '90s, I've been obsessed with finding a backup for it that matched it tonally. I had a really hard time finding one that sounded the same, and have always wondered why certain instruments have a particular tone and why it's so difficult to find others that sound the same. That lead me on my Jazz bass hunt, and I had heard *so* many things about the pre-CBS era of Fender, I really wanted to understand what had happened from 1960 and 1972 to make my main Jazz bass what it is, and how many changes had that model gone through during those years. Was it the same thing the P bass had gone through in its first 10 years, with these really dramatic changes to the design? And it was those questions that *really* led me down the rabbit hole.

I love how wholly you've thrown yourself into the archeology of bass—especially when it comes to mavericks like Leo Fender.

These are products of humans, right? So when a bass hits my hands, I want to know the context. Who made it? Why did they make it? Where did it come from? Where did the idea for it come from? What stage of development in the guitarmaker's mind was this instrument? Does it represent the ultimate product for him, or was it something that he made along the way to getting there? Those are burning questions for me, and they happen no matter what kind of man-made object I turn my gaze on ... whether it's wine or watches or whatever! All of these things are just entry points, but it's about learning more about the world and celebrating the incredible achievements of human beings!

Was the book something you had in mind as you got deeper into collecting, or just a by-product of it?

The book was a by-product, and I didn't intend to collect so many basses when I started. I originally set out to collect *maybe* a dozen basses that represented the models played by the guys

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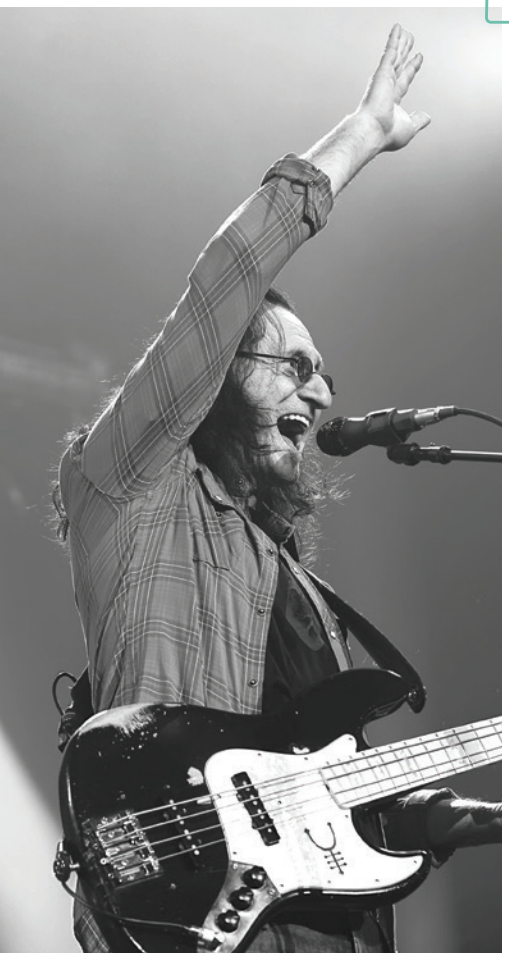
> ***The bass collecting and this book really felt like the first time that I was paying something back to the instrument that's given me my entire life."***



After decades of playing Rickenbackers, inspired by his hero Chris Squire, Lee adopted the Fender Jazz bass as his instrument of choice. Here, he wields one of his favorite J basses at the Palace in Auburn Hills, Michigan, on June 14, 2015.

Photo by Ken Settle

that taught me everything through my listenings—my heroes. So I was after a Gibson EB-3 that represented Jack Bruce, a Hofner 500-1 Violin Bass that represented Paul McCartney, a '62 Fender Jazz bass like John Paul Jones used on the early Led Zeppelin records. Those were what I set out to put together in a modest collection just to be able to have some fun with them, but when I get into collecting, I turn into sort of a completist. I get a few of these things and then get curious and have to answer the questions, like what was different on the model from the year before, and then the year after, and so it goes.

What I discovered over the course of building this collection is that there are stories connected to these instruments, and bits of minutia that maybe everyone doesn't know. And there are people that I came into contact with through collecting that were fascinating to talk to and had rich stories to share. Those were the reasons I finally thought maybe I should put these things down in some sort of compendium so the stories are preserved and the joy of collecting is shared with other like-minded people.

There are some pitfalls to avoid in collecting vintage guitars and basses. Especially now, as people have gotten really good at mimicking the details of old parts and replicating the way vintage finishes age—even studied under blacklight. How did you go about educating yourself as a buyer? Did you get burned along the way?

Yeah. I don't think you're an honest collector if you don't experience a couple of burns in your excitement! In the old days, when you became a collector of anything, you had to travel to the guitar shows and the fairs, or stumble upon guys that were trying to sell their instruments in newspaper ads and such, and you really had to know at least a little bit of what you were talking about because you had to experience them in person. Now we live in a world that's opened up in its *entirety* to sellers with the internet, so how do you know an instrument in Malaysia or somewhere is the real deal? A ton of communication has to ensue, a ton of photographic evidence has to be exchanged, but at the end of the day you have to have enough knowledge—or at least access to enough knowledge—to verify that what you're after is the real thing.

So yeah, I've bought a couple of instruments that didn't pass muster once we opened them up and got them under the blacklight, and I've bought some that fooled a lot of experts along the way.

Does an instrument's story ever outweigh how original it is, when it comes to your enjoyment of it as a collector?

I have a 1963 Strat that required an unbelievable amount of detective work and is an example of something like that. It has a matching headstock, which is *very* rare, and the factory numbers and etchings under the pickguard are all there, but it turned out not to be so straightforward and the guitar is a whole story unto itself. That is really fun to discern for me, and the seriousness of that all comes down to what the sale price is at the end and if you're buying something that someone is trying to deceive you into thinking is all original when in reality it's original-ish. That said, another thing I avoided in the book is talking about the cost or value of these things. I really try to seperate that side from the simple celebration of these instruments.

The allure is learning, and there is so much to learn in this and the other things I get into collecting. This obsession with things that represent the ingenuity of man is endless and endlessly edifying.

I know you've also got some pretty remarkable guitars, including a '59 Les Paul Standard.

I do! When Joe Bonamassa was in town a few weeks ago, he came over for dinner and we had a gathering of the Toronto guitar geeks at my house and had a great time. Joe brought it to his soundcheck the next day and gave it his thumbs up! I like guitars, too, but I don't play them. I can play guitar and I use it from time to time as a writing tool, but I'm a bass player and sometimes I feel like having these

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Among the rare basses in his armada are several Fender Telecaster models. He has a few paisley-finish examples but is still on the hunt for one in a blue floral print.

amazing guitars is a bit of a waste in my hands, and they should be with players like Joe. But I do have a mad passion for certain guitars. I always said Alex, my partner in crime for all these years, sounds best with a 335 or a Les Paul in his hands. His white 355 is such a killer, *great*-sounding instrument!

Is there anything you're still hunting?

A real pre-CBS surf green Fender Jazz or P bass. I'm still looking for a '68 Fender Telecaster bass in the blue floral print. It's remarkable how hard those are to find. The paisleys are out there and I have a couple of those, and I even have the blue floral Tele guitar, but I haven't found the bass yet. I'm looking for a super early Rickenbacker 4001 from the early '60s. I have three Ric 4000s from the early '60s, and I have a '64 4001, but I'm really looking for one of the first ones.

The interviews in the book are great and include some of your heroes, like John Paul Jones. What was it like putting that part of the book together?

It was very difficult to have so few interviews. I could've easily talked to 30 guys, but there's only so many pages and there's only so much time. I really wanted to talk to players that represented the period I'm specifically talking about in the book, like Bill Wyman and John Paul Jones. These are guys that can talk about actually buying basses during that period.

John Paul is such a fantastic character and wonderful storyteller and generous man. We spoke about his early days and what he loved about the bass, and especially his '62. And Bill Wyman in many respects invented the electric fretless bass by making it himself, and he's a character that's played *so* many different instruments—so he could speak to the reality of so many different instruments. I wanted to speak with people that connected with the book on a level beyond *just* being great players. It was really about the combination of being a profound player *and* having that collector's mindset, or having the experience of having been a witness to the golden age and being able to describe it.

Jeff Tweedy is a collector that I really appreciate, as he just buys things he loves or finds weird, and he's got just a marvelous collection. I had a really great time interviewing him for the book and spending some time with him and his gang at the Loft in Chicago. He's really a fun collector, and I love guys that have a big heart, and he has the same attitude with keyboards and pedals and drums, and the Loft is just a super-cool place to hang out.

Do you have any thoughts on the way bass playing has changed since you started?

You just have to look on Instagram and you'll see a million young players—female and male—that have astounding dexterity. A lot of them are playing 5- and 6-string instruments. There's this whole proliferation of players going beyond the 4th string, and there's a whole new school that's going to take it to a very interesting place. A lot of them stylistically aren't exactly my cup of tea, but I really appreciate the way they're playing and the fact that there's such a movement of female bass players, especially. I saw Jeff Beck this summer and Rhonda Smith is such a monster player, and I *love* seeing that shift in the culture to more women being represented.

You were called in to play in stay of your hero, the late Chris Squire, when Yes was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. What was that like?

Chris Squire was a hugely influential bass player in my life. He's the reason I started playing Rickenbackers, and it was a combination of

Chris Squire and John Entwistle, with a little bit of Jack Casady thrown in, that *really* led me down the sonic path I chose. So when I was asked to play with Yes, it was an incredible experience. I was blown away to be asked, and when I heard the lineup for the set included Rick Wakeman, Jon Anderson, Steve Howe, and Alan White—as close as you could get to the most profound version of Yes, in my world—it was such a huge thrill. It was also a real challenge, because we did "Roundabout," which is one of the greatest bass songs ever written. I practiced the shit out of that song before I met up with the guys in New York, and it was just a real thrill.

It was also bittersweet, because Chris Squire passing *so* early in his life left a huge, gaping hole in my world. Between Chris, Jack Bruce, Greg Lake, and John Wetton all being gone, we've lost a lot of amazing bass players in the last 10 years. It's really sad, and playing with Yes was a reminder that Chris wasn't there to enjoy that moment himself. I felt like I just wanted to do right by him and honor him and really play the song properly. It was a great experience meeting the guys at the Hall of Fame induction, and they were very kind to me and very respectful, and just being onstage and looking over and getting nods from Steve Howe was a *very* cool moment in my life.

I've heard that Chris Squire was in the running to produce a Rush album at one point, but when he showed up to a gig at Wembley, he was seated next to Trevor Horn, who was also being considered, and things got awkward between the two of them. What's the reality of that story?

That's not exactly how it went, but they *did* both come to see us play on the same night! We were due to interview Trevor to potentially be a producer, but I think Chris had come to the gig just to check us out. The sad thing is there were a few producer/engineers in the building that day, and I never got to talk to Chris, despite him being so close. By the time we had looked around and finished chatting with everyone, he wasn't there. I actually never got to meet him face-to-face.

Do you know what you're interested in doing next?

I'm afraid I don't really have a plan at this stage. I don't know where I'm headed musically. My attitude is that I've been part of an amazing collaboration with two guys that I have *so* much respect for and for *so* many years, and we were very purposeful in our time together. The book has been a very cool way for me to transition out of that scenario, and now I feel like I'm in a position to truly clear the deck and hit the reset button, and see what I have to say musically. I need to give myself time to experiment with that and see what comes out that I feel strong enough to be a worthy thing to do next. I have no idea where that's going to take me.

YOUTUBE IT

Geddy Lee speaks with Tom Power, host of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's arts and culture show *q*, about his experiences hunting for, and playing, some of the instruments in his *Big Beautiful Book of Bass*.

YouTube search term: Rush's Geddy Lee on his obsession with the history of the bass guitar

When I mess around at home, I'm sort of all over the map. But that's also usually how a Rush album starts. I don't imagine that whatever I do next will be drastically different, but because I have more guitars now, I'm playing more guitar in the studio and getting ideas that way. Stylistically speaking, I never felt like I was missing anything in the context of Rush because *anything* goes in that group. When I jam, I jam all over the place, but whether or not I'm going to follow it any one specific direction in the future, I have no idea. I never had any musical frustrations in Rush. It was a totally fulfilling experience for me.

One of the hallmarks of Rush's music is its technicality. Is there anything from the band's catalog that you recall being particularly challenging?

There's quite a few that were very much a pain in the ass to play! There are songs on *Clockwork Angels* that were *very* difficult. A song like "The Anarchist" doesn't seem that complicated, but requires almost complete rhythmic independence between your voice and hands in order to play that bass part and sing that vocal part at once. A lot of the *Hemispheres* album was really hard to play live because my vocal parts were recorded in such a high key that it was really taxing—not my ideal key. Other songs, like "The Main Monkey Business" were really tough because every time you play that song, you play it sort of on a knife edge because there's so many goofy changes. If you sleepwalk through that song, you're going to be in big trouble. "One Little Victory" was also a really tough song to play. Not so much as a player, but as a band. Fitting into that song's groove and coming out of the indulgent parts at the same time is tough. I like that about playing live, and I like being on that bit of a knife edge—the stuff that requires a panicked look between each other as we're coming out of the harder passages. Songs like "Working Man" are fun to play, and there's all kinds of improv going on but it's a fairly straightforward song. The highly structured songs, like "Mission," really keep you on your toes.

The instrumental stuff is always *so* precision-oriented that it really came down to being well-rehearsed, and Rush was a fanatical rehearsal band. Many people would consider Rush's rehearsal schedule over-rehearsing, but we didn't feel that way because we wanted to be able to relax into our parts, and in order to do that, you have to know those parts inside out.

Do you have a favorite recorded bass tone from Rush's discography, and has that changed now that you've experienced so many world-class instruments?

That's a really tough one. I think the bass sound on "Tom Sawyer" is pretty ideal, and "Red Barchetta" as well. There are so many records to go through, and I was always fucking around with my sound in one way or another. Every time I thought I was plateauing, I would change something about it ... which can be good and bad. That's one of the dangers of being a progressive musician: You move past something you maybe should stick around in a bit longer because you're busy searching for that next thing, that improvement. So always, as a band, the three of us were looking to improve from the last piece of recorded work.

Among the many things I've learned through this process of collecting is an appreciation for instruments and sounds that *don't* necessarily fit in my typical soundscape. I avoided those instruments for over 40 years, and on the last tour I brought some of them out with us. Gibson Thunderbirds, for example. I never wanted anything to do with a Gibson Thunderbird because I always felt like they were antithetical to my sound in Rush, but I found moments that I could play those instruments in the context of Rush and really make it work. That was really enlightening for me, and I hope to play around with more of those particular instruments.

How would you like Rush's music to be seen and remembered by future generations?

Obviously Rush was, in many ways, an ongoing experiment, so there were moments where the experiment achieved a kind of synchronicity and there are some albums that end up being arrival points. *Moving Pictures*, *Permanent Waves*, and even *Clockwork Angels* to a large degree are those kinds of albums. Someone once said that every artist deserves to be judged by their best work, and I sort of agree with it and would ask that we're remembered by our best work and really our spirit, and that we had a willingness to experiment publicly. When you experiment publicly, you have to be willing to fail publicly and I think that's an important thing for young musicians to appreciate and understand, and I think it went hand-in-hand with the successes of our career.

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Aged Acoustics Come of Age

BY RICHARD JOHNSTON

RICHARD JOHNSTON
co-founded Gryphon Stringed Instruments with Frank Ford in 1969. He later shifted from repairing vintage guitars to writing about them, and has contributed to dozens of magazines and several books, the most recent being Inventing the American Guitar. *He appraises musical instruments for* Antiques Road Show *on PBS.*

Martin's all-mahogany Streetmaster models have a broken-in vibe without the scarring of dents and scratches.

New electric guitars with distressed finishes have been around for decades. In fact, aged reproductions of the iconic 1959 sunburst Les Paul Standard were being crafted before the original examples were even 20 years old. But new acoustic guitars with pick scratches, belt-buckle dents, and artificially produced lacquer checking? Acoustic purists scoffed, "No way!" But new acoustic guitars with distressed finishes are far more common now, and not all of them are high-end models.

We don't know if it was the scoffing about artificially aged acoustics or a perceived lack of demand, but there was little change until the late 1990s, when some cracks began to appear in the "no phony wear" armor. Inspired by distressed-finish guru Tom Murphy, whose efforts on Les Pauls could be eerily realistic, Gibson began producing a few acoustic flattop reissues with lines in the lacquer, created by carefully scribing them with an X-Acto blade.

While the new century was still a toddler, distressed-finish solidbody electrics had become a firmly established part of the guitar market, with Telecasters and Stratocasters being the most common—partly because Fenders are so easy to disassemble. One company, Nash Guitars, was growing rapidly and only produced aged-finish Fender-style instruments. In all fairness, Bill Nash didn't limit his modifications to dinged body edges and finger-stained maple fretboards. Both the pickups and the playability were tweaked to be significantly different than what you would find on a new Fender-branded Strat or Tele.

Several things came together in the last decade that seemed to push acoustics closer to the new-but-looks-old zone. There was the return to using animal-protein glue for the assembly of reissue models, and carefully documented searches for "vintage spec" parts were highly publicized, sending online forums into a frenzy. The biggest boost was torrefaction, the process of thermo-curing tonewoods so they have more of the characteristics of wood that hasn't recently been part of a live tree. Last but not least was the return to thinner, all-nitrocellulose lacquer finishes. This led to a widespread acceptance of new guitars without the deep, glossy, reflective shine that had been the industry standard for as long as we can remember.

That "like brand new but old" fixation changed abruptly when two guys in North Carolina, Wes Lambe and Ben Maschal, teamed up as Pre-War Guitars and changed the game plan for vintage-style acoustics. Like Nash Guitars, Pre-War isn't the custom shop wing of a heritage brand, which means they can offer reissues of a late 1930s Gibson Advanced Jumbo or a Martin D-28 side by side. To avoid copyright issues, Pre-War has done some clever renaming. For example, the "AJ" model refers to their "American Jumbo." Most importantly—along with torrefied wood, thin lacquer, and original-style parts and details—Pre-War added simulated playing wear—sometimes a lot of it.

Of course, we can't claim that Fender's Road Worn models are the company's reaction to Bill Nash's success, and maybe C.F. Martin's recently released Aged D-18 and D-28 Authentic models were not prompted by the Pre-War Guitars versions of those same Martin dreadnoughts. We're guessing there's a connection, and, thankfully, for acoustic players who don't want to shell out big bucks for a new guitar that doesn't look new, Martin offers Streetmaster all-mahogany models that have only light distressing. The aging on these guitars is only to the finish and the result is a nice patina, and a selling price under $1,500. (Fender's Road Worn models sell for under $1,000.) Once big companies like Fender and Martin bring their pricing power to bear, consumers often get more options for less money. Remember when you could only get vintage-style tuners on custom-shop models?

With C.F. Martin offering aged versions of its classic models, it seems unlikely that new acoustics with distressed finishes are a fad that will soon disappear. As new reissues have become more and more like the originals, there is less reason to pay the huge premium to get an old version. And if you like the look and feel of older guitars, a perfect new reissue is kind of a contradiction, if only because many players don't want a new-looking guitar from decades ago. They want a guitar that has survived all those decades and shows it.

Purists who scoff at distressed finishes on new instruments can look to the violin trade for consolation. New violins that looked like an old, heavily played Stradivarius were widely available over 200 years ago.

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The Pros and Cons of Bass Pedals

BY HEIKO HOEPFINGER

HEIKO HOEPFINGER *is a German physicist and long-time bassist, classical guitarist, and motorcycle enthusiast. His work on fuel cells for the European orbital glider Hermes led him to form BassLab (basslab.de)—a manufacturer of monocoque guitars and basses.*

Bottom right: *In an app-driven world, looks can be deceiving: This tiny single-knob multiband bass compressor offers almost endless possibilities.*

Unless you've been dwelling in a cave, you've witnessed the explosion of pedals in the last decade. Our stompbox-crazy 6-string bandmates are driving this phenomenon, but it's not like bassists are immune to stompbox fever. If you've ignored this trend as a low-ender, it's time to take a quick inventory of what's available and what you need to consider when jumping into the pedal world.

The big caveat: Many of us need an entire lifetime to find our unique tone with simply the right bass, cable, amp, and cabinet. Add a myriad of effects pedals in different combinations—all of which can be used ahead of the amp or in an FX loop in serial or parallel—and you can see why it's easy to get lost or even lose the core tone you've worked so hard to perfect. A once-vibrant signal can get degraded after being run through a chain of pedals, so listen carefully to that low end.

Before we discuss one particularly useful pedal for bassists, let's categorize effects to get a better overview of the possibilities: distortion (which subdivides into several categories, including overdrive and fuzz), modulation, time-based effects, and volume manipulation. Typical modulators are chorus, flanger, phaser, and octaver, while time-based effects consist of delay and reverb. Volume manipulation happens via EQs, envelope filters, boosters, and tremolos. And as if this wasn't confusing enough, now and then someone merges several effects while claiming to have created a new category.

To see how technically challenging—and potentially confusing—today's pedals can be, let's examine what's often considered the most useful pedal for bassists: the compressor. Basically, a compressor is an automatic volume control. Bassists often use them to flatten the sonic spikes from inconsistent playing or even out the sound of different playing styles. Depending on your goals and how well you understand its functionality, a compressor can offer additional benefits.

Technically, a compressor is similar to a limiter, but there are key differences. A limiter steps in to immediately lower a signal once it reaches a certain level, while the compressor not only has an adjustable delay before it triggers, but also typically lets you control how fast and strong it reacts and how quickly it lets the volume return to normal. Setting a limiter's threshold very low will squash your dynamics, while a compressor reduces your signal's dynamics by a selected ratio without squeezing the life out of it.

Compressors come in many types: There are optical, tube, VCA (voltage controlled amplifier), FET (field effect transistor), and OTA (operational transconductance amplifier) compressors. It's hard to predict how well a compressor will work for you by simply identifying its design, so you'll have to experiment with at least a few of these technologies.

Why would you plug your bass into a compressor? One easy answer: You can increase perceived sustain, but in the real world, more sustain is something bassists rarely need. Some players might use compression to hide flawed playing skills—in other words, sound more consistent. And it works, but if you think you need this, then that's exactly the reason you *shouldn't* get one. Instead, spent more time developing your right-hand technique. My advice? Never use a compressor when practicing.

Depending on a specific compressor's features and how artfully you use it, you can add punch to your tone, especially with devices that offer multiband compression or the ability to blend the original signal in parallel with the compressed output. And as with the Kemper Profiler amp, digitalization is rapidly altering the pedal world. For example, one would think that with its single-knob design, the tiny TC Electronic SpectraComp bass compressor (pictured below) is a limited, but easy-to-use device. But that's until you start editing all the parameters this 3-band compressor offers through TC's TonePrint app and discover that it's simultaneously doing a multitude of things with that single knob.

Today, it's rarely enough to have a fat tone and solid groove. Dealing with rapidly evolving technology is a part of playing bass in the 21st century, whether we like it or not. We'll explore this idea in future columns.

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Chasing the "Why"

BY VICTOR BRODÉN

VICTOR BRODÉN
is a Nashville bassist and producer who has toured and recorded with more than 25 major-label artists, including LeAnn Rimes, Richard Marx, Casting Crowns, and Randy Houser. His credits also include Grammy-winning albums and numerous television specials on CMT and GAC, as well as performances on The Tonight Show *and* The Ellen DeGeneres Show. *You can reach him at vbroden@yahoo.com.*

Our columnist chose to play bass to be in the middle of the band, connected to both melody and rhythm.

With so many genres, variations, uses, and definitions contained in just five letters, the word "music" is one of the most all-encompassing in the English language While wandering the halls of the NAMM show this year, the entire spectrum of the word was on display. Even though the convention is mostly about commerce, the thing that really hit me is that people who play music seem to get fulfillment, satisfaction, and excitement from doing things very differently from each other.

This diversity of expression is especially on display while walking through the bass section of NAMM. Bass gets heard in convention halls in ways you would rarely experience the instrument out in the wild, so to speak. But despite the convention having strict decibel limits and hundreds of musicians making noise in your immediate vicinity, you can experience how differently we bassists truly are in just a few minutes.

I believe everybody who plays bass does so for slightly different reasons. Everyone has his or her own *why*. I also believe those same reasons are sometimes very obvious in somebody's playing, similar to the way influences can be obvious in playing. I'm currently taking my first year off from being a full-time touring bassist in 22 years, so I've been giving plenty of thought to my own "why" lately. *Why* do I want to go back to playing, and are the reasons the same ones I had when I was a kid?

What was *your* bass why? When everyone else in the band was fighting over who got to be the lead singer or lead guitarist, you had something that made you chose bass instead. I'm well aware that some people started playing bass because the band had too many guitar players, or because they received a hand-me-down bass from an uncle, and it was the cheapest way to go. But many of us were drawn to the bass for some other reason. Was it the mystique of the low notes you can feel and sometimes not hear? Was it the fact that the bass looks mightier than its 6-string little brother? Whatever the reason was for you, it's good to reconnect with it as often as possible.

Many bassists I know fell in love with the bass as a solo voice. When they are not playing in some kind of ensemble, they take any chance they get to make bass-solo arrangements. On the other end of the spectrum, I have friends who are accomplished multi-instrumentalists and producers who perform their own bass tracks unless the music is too technically involved. Their why may be strictly for the sake of convenience—to avoid having to call a bassist or because they want to be able to record an idea the very moment they have it.

My own initial love affair with the instrument was largely due to the synth-pop wave of the mid '80s. As a preteen, I was listening to artists like Depeche Mode, Howard Jones, and Alphaville. The simple but very singable synth-bass lines had my ear, and I formed a trio with two friends in which we all played cheap Casio keyboards. We took turns playing the synth-bass lines in that little trio, but when the decision was made to buy "real" instruments after a year of only playing keyboards, I chose the bass. I wanted to continue playing those simple yet amazing sub hooks. That's how I picked the bass at the age of 12. There is, however, one more integral part of my why for playing bass.

I grew up with a father who was a home-stereo fanatic (aka audiophile). I was practically trained how to sit in front of a stereo and actively listen to the music, rather than just having music on as a distraction in the background. Closing my eyes and disappearing into the music was a high for me like no other, and I think it kept me out of a lot of trouble. My why is that high I only get from being in the middle of the music. I started playing bass so I could be right *in the middle* of the speakers, figuratively speaking, but on a more intense level than being a music fan in the middle of the stereo sound field wearing a great set of headphones. Some people's why is from a creative spark. My why was to create the ultimate fan experience.

The way I see it, we bassists get the opportunity to truly feel that middle in a fantastic way when playing live in a band. We get to be part of the rhythmical aspect of music with the drummer, *and* simultaneously connect to the melodic aspect of the music with the other instruments.

Whether a person is playing polkas on a trumpet or programming keyboard parts through drawing notes in their DAW instead of actually playing them, they both have reasons for doing exactly what they are doing. And at the end of the day, all that truly matters is whatever musical expression puts a smile on your face.

Photo by Jennifer Troche-Walsh

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Mort, Death's Apprentice: Brutal Death Metal Riffs

BY DAVID SCHNEIDER

DAVID SCHNEIDER *is a German guitarist based in San Luis Potosí, Mexico, where he plays in death/crust/doom band Hinrichten, and alt-rock band Vitalis. He has a master's degree in ethnomusicology and systematic musicology, and did research on perceptions of authenticity in the metal scene, as well as the perception and psychology of film music. Schneider is also co-owner of Albor Custom Guitars.*

CHOPS Advanced
THEORY Intermediate
LESSON OVERVIEW

- Ramp up your picking speed.
- Learn the basic elements of death metal rhythm guitar.
- Develop riffs that combine dissonance, chromaticism, and atonal elements.

In our previous metal lesson, we examined the melodic style that emerged in and around Gothenburg, Sweden. This time let's focus on a style that—even though it originated in the States—isn't associated with any particular region.

Brutal death metal has very active and growing underground scenes in all of Europe, the U.S., Southeast Asia, and Russia, largely thanks to the recent emergence of slam death metal, which focuses on slower so-called "slam" parts. Right now, it's probably the most vibrant underground metal genre with local scenes being connected internationally and many fans traveling to different countries to catch as many festivals as possible.

Named after its thematic focus on extreme violence and relentlessly ferocious music, the style emerged in the U.S. in the early '90s. In particular, the band Suffocation are considered to have delivered the blueprint of what would become brutal death metal on their 1991 debut *Effigy of the Forgotten*. Mixing violent lyrics inspired by Cannibal Corpse with a raw, yet technical delivery influenced by grindcore and New York hardcore, the album was not received well by critics when it was released. However, it became a cult classic that defined the genre. Brutal death metal's building blocks are atonal riffs, relentless speed that's only occasionally interrupted by slow, hardcore-derived slam/breakdown parts, and unconventional song structures. This is paired with indecipherable guttural and so-called "pig squeal" vocals.

All but one of the examples in this lesson are tuned down to B standard (B–E–A–D–F♯–B), which is common for many bands in this genre. Disclaimer: You can use either a 6- or 7-string guitar for these examples. However, if you choose the latter, keep in mind that the 3rd string on a 7-string is usually tuned to G (B–E–A–D–G–B–E). To match the 6-string tuning we use in this lesson, you will either need to tune your 3rd string down to F♯ or adjust your fingering.

Most bands use modern high-gain tube amps, so I'd recommend a Peavey 5150/6505, Mesa/Boogie Rectifier, or whatever high-gain amp, or simulation, you can get your hands on. In the early days, most bands used solid-state amps like a Marshall Valvestate. These solid-state amps produced a sludgy,

slightly muddy high-gain tone that gave the early recordings a lot of their raw charm.

Now let's dive into the examples. These are inspired by different bands, which I'll reference, but unlike the last installment, they're not meant to represent a band's style. Rather, they illustrate different types of riffs and elements typically used by brutal death metal bands.

Ex.1 shows the use of tremolo picking as heard in early Suffocation records. It is relatively fast and requires a warmed-up picking hand. As with most music in this genre, the riff is atonal and uses a lot of chromatic movement. Some emphasis is put on minor seconds and the tritone to create a dark, dissonant melody.

Click here for Ex. 1

Let's dig into another Suffocation-inspired riff **(Ex. 2)** that uses similar atonal chromaticism. It focuses again on minor seconds and tritones, but adds some leaps of a third when switching strings. This fast galloping rhythm would either be accompanied by a slower half-time beat or a blast beat.

Click here for Ex. 2

Now we'll raise the tempo a little. **Ex. 3** is a bit longer and inspired by Gorgasm. Anything that isn't 16th-notes can be downpicked to get a tight aggressive sound or alternate picked for a messier, less-defined sound. Gorgasm was known for downpicking a lot of their stuff, while bands like Dying Fetus would use alternate picking for fast eighth-note power chords.

The riff is not easy at this tempo. Take your time working up to those speeds to avoid hurting your muscles. It's an atonal riff that shows a few different aspects: The use of power chords and inverted power chords to add dissonance, fast-paced riffs to create a chaotic violent feel, and the extreme speeds that some bands rely on. (As a matter of fact, Gorgasm and other bands often play even faster.)

Click here for Ex. 3

Ex. 4 is a well-deserved break for the picking hand and shows a groovy, heavy slam riff inspired by Devourment. As in the previous examples, it relies on atonal, chromatic ideas, but features inverted power chords to add some dissonance and make the chordal playing flow a bit easier. Think of it as moving around power chords in drop tuning.

Click here for Ex. 4

Inspired by Dying Fetus, **Ex. 5** is another type of slam riff that's heavily influenced by the breakdowns used in hardcore bands. The open 6th string serves as a kind of pedal tone around which power chords move chromatically.

Click here for Ex. 5

Ex. 6 is another Dying Fetus-inspired riff that shows the more technical side of the genre by using fast, chromatic pull-offs combined with tapping and a sweep at the end. The riff is loosely based around a B key center with the open 6th string again serving as a pedal tone that gives the riff a rooted feeling. The pull-offs are all based around a minor third and move chromatically. The tapped note is derived from the E° arpeggio (E–G–B♭). The arpeggios at the end of the riff break with the 16th-note gallop feel and are played in triplets. It's a Bm arpeggio (B–D–F♯) that moves up a tritone to an Fm arpeggio (F–A♭–C). The sweep is meant to be played somewhat slurry. It's just supposed to add some chaos to the riff, but if you want to go clean and technical on it that's cool, too.

Click here for Ex. 6

Ex. 7 shows a riff inspired by Deeds of Flesh, whose guitarist, the late Erik Lindmark, had an immense influence on the scene. He was not only an incredible player, but he started Unique Leader Records, an important label that supported other bands in the scene. The riff has a triplet feel that balances palm-muted, inverted power chords with faster tremolo-picked notes that move downward chromatically. (Unlike the other examples, this is notated in standard E–A–D–G–B–E tuning.)

Click here for Ex.7

The fast eighth-note riff in **Ex. 8** is typical of many brutal death metal bands and is usually accompanied by a blast beat that matches the guitar. This leads to a machine gun-like unison sound. Harmonically, we again find chromaticism, tritones, minor thirds, and minor seconds.

Click here for Ex.8

Blast but not least, **Ex. 9** shows another riff inspired by Suffocation. This is a pedal-tone riff where the power chords move around and the pedal note changes to fit the power-chord harmony.

Click here for Ex.9

Twang 101: Bluegrass Goes Electric!

BY LEVI CLAY

LEVI CLAY *is a London-based guitar player, teacher, and transcriber. His unique approach to learning keeps him in constant demand from students the world over, and his expertise as a transcriber has introduced his work to a whole new audience. For more information, check out leviclaycom.*

CHOPS Intermediate
THEORY Beginner

LESSON OVERVIEW

- Improve your alternate picking.
- Discover how to use the "country" scale.
- Create a deeper understanding of chord shapes across the neck.

Those who haven't investigated bluegrass might write it off as simply another branch on the country music tree, but there's so much more to dig into. Born out of the Appalachian mountain regions, bluegrass is the exciting meld of Irish and Scottish folk music with gospel, jazz, and blues elements. It's a genre dominated by high-level playing on a variety of instruments, including flattop steel-string guitar, fiddle, banjo, mandolin, and Dobro.

There have been many bluegrass guitar icons, from the pioneering Doc Watson, Clarence White, and Tony Rice, to such modern masters as Bryan Sutton and David Grier. Today, younger players like Molly Tuttle and Carl Miner keep the genre alive.

Traditionally, bluegrass is played on acoustic instruments. Some people will tell you that putting the words "electric" and "bluegrass" in the same sentence creates an oxymoron, like "baroque jazz." Although those purists have a valid point, electric bluegrass and newgrass are accepted genres that take influence from the early pickers and apply it to more modern instrumentation. And that's exactly what we'll do right now.

This lesson will focus on the fundamental techniques and note choices you'll need to unlock the essence of flatpick guitar. Once you digest the basics, you'll be ready to steal endless amounts of vocabulary from the masters of the style. The first thing to discuss is alternate-picking technique. Traditional flatpickers exist in a purely acoustic world, and being heard over loud banjos, Dobros, and fiddles is extremely important. The best way to achieve this is with a strong picking hand that's capable of projecting each note to the audience.

Ex. 1 is a simple ascending and descending G major pentatonic scale (G–A–B–D–E). This is played with strict alternate picking: Begin with a downstroke, then follow it with an upstroke, then play a downstroke, and so on.

Click here for Ex. 1

The problem with alternate picking will always be when you cross strings. (Note: Entire books have been devoted to this subject—we're just scratching the surface here.) The two aspects we'll examine right now are "inside" and "outside" picking.

Outside picking is what happens when you pick a string, and then while targeting the next one, you jump over it and swing back to pick it. The flatpick attacks the outside edges of the two strings.

In **Ex. 2**, play the A string with a downstroke, then the D string with an upstroke. This is outside motion. Each subsequent string crossing motion uses this outside picking technique.

Click here for Ex. 2

Most players find the outside mechanics easier than the more restrictive inside motion. As you may be able to work out, inside picking technique is where your pick is stuck between two strings.

The following lick (**Ex. 3**) uses only this inside motion. Play it slowly and then compare how fast and accurately you can play it relative to Ex. 2.

Click here for Ex. 3

You won't have the luxury of structuring all your phrases to eliminate one motion or the other, so it's best to accept this reality and develop the skills needed to get by with both approaches. The best of the best didn't make excuses, they just played down-up-down-up over and over for decades.

Ex. 4 features one note per string. This fast string-crossing motion requires a good level of proficiency with both inside and outside approaches to build up any sort of speed.

Click here for Ex. 4

The secret to alternate picking isn't to always alternate pickstrokes between notes, but to keep the motion of the hand going. In short, the hand will move in the alternating fashion whether or not you strike a string. If you have a stream of eighth-notes, they'll be alternate picked, but if there are some quarter-notes thrown in, the hand won't freeze and wait for the next note. You'll play the note with a downstroke, move up and not play anything, then drop back onto the strings and play the next note with a downstroke (**Ex. 5**).

Click here for Ex. 5

This way all your downbeats are played with downstrokes and upbeats are upstrokes. You'll see people refer to this as "strict alternate picking." With that out of the way, it's worth looking at the note choices of a typical bluegrass player.

A quick analysis of some bluegrass tunes will reveal this isn't harmonically complex music. Nearly all of the chords you're going to be dealing with are major and minor triads, so note choice isn't going to break the brain.

One approach would be to play a line based on the major scale of the key you're in. For example, if you're playing a song in G, the G major scale (G–A–B–C–D–E–F♯) makes a good starting point.

A more stylistically appropriate approach would be to use the "country scale," which is a major pentatonic scale with an added ♭3. In G that would be G–A–B♭–B–D–E. **Ex. 6** shows this scale played beginning in the open position and moving up on the 3rd string.

Click here for Ex. 6

Let's put all this into practice. **Ex. 7** shows a line built around a G chord using this strict alternate-picking motion applied to string crossing mechanics in both directions. This sticks closely to the country scale, but there's also an added C in the third measure to allow the 3 to land on the downbeat of measure four.

Click here for Ex. 7

This next line (**Ex. 8**) uses the same idea, but now beginning up at the 5th fret area and moving down over the course of the lick.

It's worth looking at each string crossing to categorize it as inside or outside. This will help further your understanding of the importance of these two picking techniques.

Click here for Ex.8

Here's another idea around G (**Ex. 9**), but to create some smoother motion, this time we add notes from G Mixolydian (G–A–B–C–D–E–F), as well as a bluesy D♭ (♭5) as a chromatic passing tone. The trick here is nailing all the position shifts as you're going from the 3rd fret up to the 10th fret.

Click here for Ex.9

Our final example (**Ex. 10**) takes what we've learned about approaching a major chord and applies it to two different chords. First, we have two measures of G, then C, and back to G.

When playing over the C, your note choice changes to the country scale, but now built from C (C–D–E♭–E–G–A). Switching between these chords poses a technical challenge, along with a visual one. Take your time with a lick like this, and make sure you're able to see the underlying chord at all times.

Click here for Ex.10

How to Play Slower

BY SHAWN PERSINGER

SHAWN PERSINGER, *a.k.a. Prester John, has performed and taught guitar on five continents, in 36 countries, and hundreds of cities. His music has been described as a myriad of delightful musical paradoxes: complex but catchy; virtuosic yet affable; smart and whimsical. Readers and critics are hailing his latest book,* The 50 Greatest Guitar Books, *as a monumental achievement in music education. For more information, visit greatestguitarbooks.com.*

CHOPS Beginner
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LESSON OVERVIEW

- **Add more color, dynamics, and vibe to your playing.**
- **Develop more control over how you play a note.**
- **Learn how to do more with less.**

If you're a shredder who's into Yngwie Malmsteen, you probably think Eric Clapton is the slow player. If you love Clapton's lightning-fast performance of "Crossroads" from *Wheels of Fire*, you might believe Robert Johnson's original version (properly titled "Cross Road Blues") crawls along a little faster than a hyper turtle. And if you can't wrap your mind around Johnson's dexterity with the slide, perhaps Brij Bhushan Kabra's meditative Indian slide playing on *Call of the Valley* is more your ... speed. And, at the risk of waxing philosophical, consider that an open 5th-string A vibrates at 110 Hz a second. Well, that's still pretty fast by almost any standard! In this lesson we'll keep in mind (with all due respect to Einstein) this relativity, and approach "slower" from a variety of angles.

Sustain

Besides resting (which we'll get to soon enough), the slowest and most engaging way to play a note is to sustain it. There are few more skilled at this than Carlos Santana. On his live version of "Europa" from *Viva Santana*, Carlos manages to sustain a note for just under one minute (check out the video below starting at 3:36). And though it's true that the band is playing an upbeat Latin groove over a two-chord vamp, it's Carlos' painstakingly sustained note that creates the tension and sense of excitement. **Ex. 1** is a Santana-esque groove featuring several sustained notes, including one long-held bend.

Click here for Ex. 1

While Santana proves that you can do a lot with just one note, there are plenty of multiple-note variations you can create from a sustained, vibrating string. When it comes to this approach, one immediately thinks of Jimi Hendrix and his live performances of "Machine Gun," "Wild Thing," and "The Star-Spangled Banner." My favorite Hendrix sustained note can be heard on his version of "Auld Lang Syne" from *Live at the Fillmore East*, which he recorded on New Year's Eve of 1969. In this stellar performance, Jimi sustains a note for more than 10 seconds then proceeds to perform the melody without ever picking the strings, using only his whammy bar and a series of slides. **Ex. 2** is an imitation of Jimi's performance using hammer-ons and pull-offs instead of whammy bar technique.

Click here for Ex. 2

In the aforementioned songs, both Santana and Hendrix would have been playing through amplifiers with the volumes completely cranked. While this approach is fun, today you have several options when it comes to performing such long, sustained notes. Countless compressors, actual "sustain" pedals,

and digital modeling amps will allow you to play with minimal volume and still achieve infinite sustain. Experiment with different setups to decide what is best for you in any given situation.

Space

A second approach to playing slower, and one that can be achieved with or without amplifiers, is the simple act of resting between phrases, or more dramatically, between the notes that make up your phrases. Now I say "simple," but if you were to listen to any number of guitar recordings you might wonder, "If it's so simple, how come so few do it?" It is true, guitar players do seem to have an aversion to resting and creating space in their playing. Still, whether this is out of habit, imitation, or thoughtlessness, the solution is simple.

To get comfortable with this approach, listen and imitate vocalists who, unlike guitarists, have to breathe between phrases. A good place to start with vocal mimicry is the study of any number of versions of W.C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues," a standard 12-bar form that features a more lyrical and less lick-based melody. Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and Etta James all have recorded versions of this blues standard and, notably, Etta's version begins with a bold a cappella introduction that all musicians could stand to learn from.

Ex. 3 features acoustic and electric versions of two choruses of "St. Louis Blues." The first time through the melody is performed almost identically to the original 1914 sheet music. While this version does have a fair amount of space, the phrasing is rather dull rhythmically. The second chorus adds even more space (resist the temptation to fill the six beats rests at the end of each phrase), is more syncopated, and breaks up each individual lyrical sentence with rests in between words, rather than stringing the lyrics together in one long phrase.

Click here for Ex. 3

There, are of course, myriad other paradigms of vocal phrasing that highlight the use of space and that also translate well to the guitar. **Ex. 4** borrows heavily from Patsy Cline, who was particularly adept in her use of space and timing, often pausing unexpectedly and then twisting her notes into a surprising series of syncopations that few other musicians would have considered. It starts with a very straight, *Fake Book*-style delivery, then reveals how Patsy might vary a repeated phrase with her use of space, articulation, and rhythmic variation, similar to the verses of "Crazy."

Click here for Ex. 4

Refinement

One of the numerous benefits of playing slower is that it can underscore the subtler aspects of one's guitar technique. By performing an attack or articulation gingerly, the art can be heard in both the procedure and the musical result. Jeff Beck is a master of this type of slow playing, and his 1976 recording of Charles Mingus' "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat" is the archetype performance. Ex. 5 takes many of the slow articulations Beck uses in "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat"—measured bends, circumspect slides, deliberate rakes, even the elusive click of switching pickups—and applies them to "Amazing Grace," which Beck has also recorded, though with a different approach and, ironically a, slightly faster tempo than presented here.

Click here for Ex. 5

Solo

Legions of fingerstyle guitarists are under the impression that, because they're playing solo, they must play all the usual parts at once and it must be rhythmically relentless. As a result, far too much fingerstyle music is one-dimensional. Not so for Leo Kottke's music. Though Kottke is notorious for playing more notes in one song than most guitarists perform in 10, he also has pieces that he delivers with a leisurely approach: "Three Walls and Bars," "Parade," and "Easter" are all prime examples. **Ex. 6** is an homage to Kottke's more relaxed compositions. It features an amalgamation of the aforementioned songs, plus a little Robbie Basho thrown in too.

Click here for Ex. 6

Listen

Superficially, this final approach to slowness might seem radically different from all the previous examples, but in fact, incorporating this exercise into your regular practice routine can make everything you play, slow or fast, take on new levels of meaning and purpose.

Now many of you might think this technique is little more than new-age hokum, and I can appreciate that. Still, there is no agenda here other than to help you become a more thoughtful and musical player, so I entreat you to give this next exercise

a few tries to see if it enhances your playing. If not, you have the six previous examples to work with. But if it does, it could change your playing forever. (Note: I have only reluctantly included an audio version of this exercise because I feel it does not translate well to any recorded audio medium. The true test is the sound you yourself create. If you do use my audio as a guide, please listen with headphones.)

Rather than attempting to explain—acoustically, mentally, and physics-wise—what is going on when you perform this exercise, I urge you to simply follow the instructions below. After experiencing the sounds, you can decide if you've begun listening and hearing differently. (Note: This exercise is best done with an acoustic guitar or with an electric through a relatively clean, low-volume amplifier, otherwise you might be sustaining and resting for much, much longer than you want to.)

1) Find a relatively quiet room in which to do this exercise.
2) With your eyes closed, pick one note.
3) Let it sustain as long as it will naturally, with no vibrato.
4) When the note has decayed fully, take your hand off the guitar and rest for approximately the same amount of time that the note sustained.
5) Repeat this exercise, at least three more times, with any notes you choose.
6) Evaluate the process.

What did you hear? If you're like many players I've done this exercise (**Ex. 7**) with, you may have noticed more than you would have imagined. For instance, you can actually hear the overtones. Overtones are another topic beyond this scope of this lesson, but the briefest of explanations is to say that there are no "pure" notes in music. Every note is made up of several discrete frequencies, the fundamental (the name we give the note) and many overtones (additional frequencies greater than the fundamental), which usually go undetected if one doesn't play slowly. By playing at this glacial pace, one can hear notes within notes.

Your instrument sustains for much longer than you thought possible.

Different attacks create tones. Did the exercise encourage you to modify your attack? Perhaps you tried using your bare fingers instead of the pick? Did you find yourself picking harder or lighter? Did you pick in different areas relative to the acoustic's soundhole or the electric's bridge?

Resting between notes makes each subsequent note sound fuller.

The lower the note, the longer the sustain.

Does noticing these small details make you a better player? That is not for me to say unequivocally, but certainly this exercise in active listening allows one to recognize the strongest aspects of one's playing and to rectify the weaker aspects. It also can give musicians a greater appreciation of numerous facets of sound, from sound waves and frequency vibrations to one's own auditory perception. If this exercise and these topics are of interest to you, I suggest following up with an investigation of the works of John Cage, Pauline Oliveros, and La Monte Young, as they have all worked seriously within the realms of silence, long sustained notes, and what Oliveros calls "Deep Listening."

Less is More, When There's More

As so often is the case, balance is crucial. Musical choices don't have to be autocratic, dogmatic, or absolute. Slow playing is highly effective when it's offset by its counterpoint—speed. While practicing, if you forgo automatic pilot and remember to equalize a barrage of notes with rests, or long, sustained notes, or pithy, quarter-note phrases (as opposed to 32nd-note run-on sentences), when it comes time to perform, your playing will be invigorated by complementary and dynamic ideas. And, paradoxically, playing slower will make your fast playing seem even faster.

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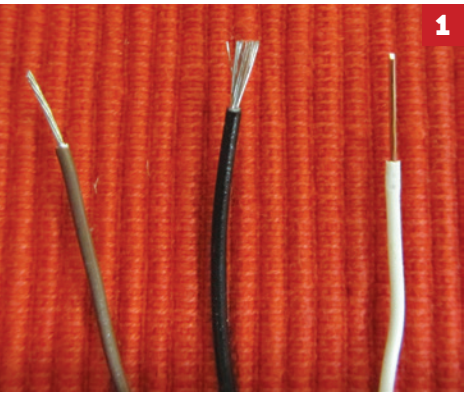
The Pros and Cons of Plastic-Coated Wire

BY DIRK WACKER

DIRK WACKER *lives in Germany and has been a guitar addict since age 5. He's also a hardcore DIY-er for guitars, amps, and stompboxes and runs a website on the subject (singlecoil.com). When not working at his guitar workbench, he plays country, rockabilly, surf, and flamenco. Contact him at info@singlecoil.com.*



If you tinker with guitars, you'll encounter many types of wire inside the control cavities, as well as a wide selection of related tools. It really pays to understand the properties of different types of wire and how to work with each one of them—especially if you want the best results from your DIY efforts. We began our informal series on wire by discussing tools and exploring cloth-covered wire—the product that started it all in the '50s. (If you missed this, read "Working with Wire" on premierguitar.com.)

Now let's examine what's lurking inside most modern production instruments and amps: plastic-coated wire. Typically only vintage-flavored reissues use cloth and braided wire today, while boutique builders usually use high-grade audiophile products, such as Teflon-coated silver wire. Everything else features plastic-coated wire, with polyvinyl chloride (PVC) being the most common form of insulation. Why?

- It's cheap and available in a variety of types, diameters, and colors.
- It's easy and fast to strip, lay out, and work with.
- Modern PVC insulation is extremely stable and will last a very long time.

I suspect few companies consider resistance and capacitance—and therefore "tone'—when selecting wire for their products. A common argument is that a wire has no sonic influence in a guitar, and even if it theoretically did, the actual *length* of the wire used in an electric guitar is too short to make any noticeable difference.

Hmmm ... have you ever measured the total length of all wire inside a Stratocaster? I have several times, and it's almost three meters, or approximately 9.8 feet. And that's before you add in the wire leading from the three pickups. I don't consider this "too short" to ignore, but we'll take that up another time.

Plastic-coated wire has been available since the mid '60s. Gibson started using it for guitars in 1966, followed by Fender around 1968. The story goes that Fender had large quantities of cloth-wire spools on their shelves that they'd purchased at discount, so when CBS bought Fender in February 1965, the company elected to use up this supply before they switched to more modern plastic-coated wire.

Today, plastic-coated wire comes in seemingly limitless variations. Here's some background on the types you're likely to use in guitar projects, as well as their pros and cons.

Stranded wire. This is available in standard untinned or pre-tinned (aka "pre-bond") versions, and the strands are usually made of copper. Unlike cloth-covered wire, you can't simply assume the less strands it has, the more flexible and bendable it will be—or vice versa. Depending on the overall construction of the wire, it's possible that the more super-fine strands it has, the more flexible it is. You'll have to twist and pre-tin the ends of untinned wire before you can solder it, whereas pre-tinned wire is ready to solder.

Solid-core wire. This is also available in pre-tinned and untinned versions. One advantage of solid-core wire is that it stays exactly where you lay it. But its bending radius is not infinite, which means the wire can break if you bend it too much. Solid-core wire is ideal for using in small electronic compartments where space is a consideration.

Photo 1 shows three types of wire (from left to right): tinned stranded, untinned stranded, and solid-core.

Diving into wire specs. Wire diameter is usually specified in AWG (American wire gauge), a spec that's also widely used in the metric world today. [*Editor's note: In AWG spec, the larger the number, the smaller the diameter. For example, 22-gauge wire is considerably smaller than 12-gauge wire.*] Stranded wire is usually included in the spec. For example, 22/7AWG or AWG22/7 means the wire has a diameter of 22AWG and there are seven individual strands inside. If a manufacturer is more specific in its description of a stranded wire, it can look like this: 22AWG 7/30. This means the wire has a diameter of 22AWG with seven individual 30AWG strands inside. If you only see AWG22 in the description, it usually means it's a solid-core wire, but it can also be a careless or incomplete description of a stranded wire, so be sure to confirm this.

Guitar companies typically use a stranded AWG22 wire. Generally, the wire's diameter isn't sonically significant inside a passive guitar. Selecting wire diameter is more a matter of considering available space and taking into account how tricky the wiring might be. Heavier wires are usually easier to

Photos courtesy of singlecoil.com

work with, but depending on their stiffness, they can be more difficult to route. So if you need to place a lot of wire inside a small Telecaster cavity, a thinner wire can make it much easier to complete your project without going insane.

It's always a good idea to have different gauges in different colors at hand, preferably in both stranded and solid-core versions. You can buy wire very inexpensively in small rings or in complete spools. In our shop we use bigger spools of AWG22/16 stranded wire in black and vintage white, and smaller rings of the same wire in colors like red, blue, and green (**Photo 2**). We do the same with solid-core wire. For smaller compartments and control cavities, we also stock stranded and solid-core wire in AWG24/16. These are very useful gauges, and I recommend them for wiring guitars and basses.

There's a lot of discussion about what sounds best—stranded or solid-core wire. Many audiophiles swear that solid-core sounds superior. If you get bored, do a Google search for "skin effect," which is the typical audiophile argument. Then forget about what you read because the skin effect happens with stranded *and* solid wire. Besides, the power loss at the heart of this debate is too small to identify in a real-world audio system, and occurs at a frequency that's too high for humans to hear. Once you get down to frequencies within the range of human hearing, any power loss due to skin effect is virtually zero in common copper wire. But this debate still rages on in the audiophile world and probably always will.

Tools for plastic-coated wire. If you only want the basics, you don't need much beyond the tools we mentioned in the previous column about cloth-covered wire. For stripping plastic-coated wire, I suggest getting a small snap blade utility knife from your local home improvement store or a scalpel on eBay. Personally, I prefer X-Acto's #18 blade shape, but many other blade shapes work well for removing the wire's insulation. You'll also need an underlay with a very smooth surface, such as a piece of glass, a tile, or a small mirror (**Photo 3**). I prefer a piece of glass or a smooth tile with rubber feet glued to the bottom.

That's basically all you need to strip plastic-coated wire, but if you want a dedicated device, there are both manual and self-adjusting stripping tools, special wire strippers for fine-gauged or solid-core wires, and much more. You can see some of these in **Photo 4**.

Roll with it! As far as stripping the wire manually with a blade, here's the basic procedure that works with all kinds of plastic-coated wire, whether it's stranded or solid-core, pre-tinned or not.

(1) Cut the wire to length and place it on your smooth underlay, holding it down with your index finger.

(2) Determine how much length of plastic insulation you want to remove from the end of the wire. With your utility knife or scalpel, carefully (!) cut into the insulation (**Photo 5**). You want to avoid cutting into the wire itself. This requires lots of practice. When you've cut through the exposed insulation, roll the wire toward you with your index finger to reveal fresh insulation and cut again. The underlay's smooth surface will help you to roll the wire.

Repeat this process until you've scribed a complete circle through the insulation and you can pull this small "sleeve" away with your fingers. With practice, you can do this with a flowing motion and strip a wire in seconds.

(3) Now you'll need to prep the wire. Untinned stranded wire has to be twisted and pre-tinned; untinned solid-core wire only needs to be pre-tinned. You can skip this step when you use pre-tinned wires.

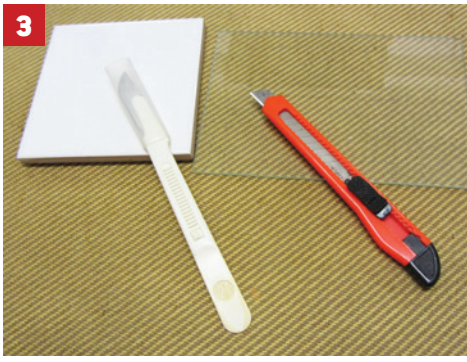
And that's it—you're ready to begin soldering.

More lore. A downside to the common PVC insulation used on plastic-coated wire is that it melts easily when you touch it with the soldering iron. It also stinks when you melt it! If the insulation is melted down to the strands or core—something I often see inside guitars—this can create accidental shorts or related issues. So, when wielding that soldering iron, work quickly and carefully. (We'll revisit this topic when we explore Teflon-insulated wire in a future column.)

To ensure long-term trouble-free operation, be sure to buy good quality wire. Avoid crappy, super-cheap plastic-coated wire—it typically has only three or four fragile strands that will easily break in a short time.

And stay away from new-old-stock (NOS) plastic-coated wire from the '60s. Yes, it's vintage, but that doesn't make it good. In the early days of plastic-coated wire, the chemical formula for the insulation was far from perfect. The plasticizers used back then (phthalates, mostly DEHP) evaporate over time, causing the wire to first get very stiff and then break, and UV light and high temperatures speed up this deterioration. I often see this problem inside vintage guitars from the '60s and early '70s.

We'll tackle another guitar project next time, so stay tuned. Until then ... keep on modding!



Photos courtesy of singlecoil.com

What You Really Missed at NAMM!

BY PHILIPPE HERNDON

PHILIPPE HERNDON
is the founder and chief product designer at Caroline Guitar Company. One day he might actually get around to making a guitar. He likes pretty much any British TV series that Netflix recommends for him.

One of Philippe Herndon's NAMM highlights was meeting sound inventor Tom Cram, who revived the DOD and DigiTech brands, and is now launching his own Spiral Electric FX line.

NAMM. Those of you who don't attend only get to see it from afar. A mix of Mecca, the Detroit auto show, the Consumer Electronics Show, and a thousand Wonka factory tours for gear dorks. It always looks so cool! And think of all the people you get to see or meet: A-listers like Sinbad and John Stamos wandering the halls, content gurus stumbling around with all their camera gear, and those long winding lines of people waiting to meet Corey Feldman or someone who played with Ozzy or Kiss for six months two decades ago! What could be better?

Everybody flaunts their bravest face, their most flattering press, and whatever noteworthy artists happen to stumble into or be paid to play at their booth. Want to know what you really missed in pedal world if you weren't at NAMM this January?

Bronchitis and tinnitus. Jokes about NAMMthrax might make people roll their eyes, but the truth is that when you cram tens of thousands of people with iffy histories of personal care (musicians, writers, engineers) to shake hands, hug, network, and stand in close proximity to each other, people get sick. I gave up on any pretense of politeness and regularly slathered my hands in sanitizer immediately after speaking with people. It's over a week since the show ended and I still don't have my voice back. Good times!

Meanwhile, the yawning cacophonous maw of sound in our section evoked a fighter plane or UFO that would hover in our immediate proximity. My inner True Detective agitated, I traced one particularly egregious offender to a small display staffed by one man embodying a #rigsofdad post. Protected by earplugs, I withstood him for 72 straight seconds as he aimlessly sprayed a gruel of nonstop loud, sloppy, clumsy pseudo-shred audio-vomit in E-minor into the aisle like an oscillating lawn sprinkler—a siren's song seeking the attention of anyone who might confuse musical bullying for affection.

I made a mental note to express my eternal gratitude to our neighbors, Fuzzrocious Pedals, a company whose products are very well suited toward the creation of loud sonic chaos and genuine rock 'n' roll discomfort, but whose demo setups and amplifier placement exhibited sincere consideration for their nearby peers.

Two sides of the coin. On one side is a "more vintage than vintage" mindset, where classic sounds and equipment have been mined, duplicated, elaborated, and supposedly improved upon by contemporary builders with nostalgia and hindsight. I don't mean that dismissively. If your goal is to sound like classic recordings from whatever era you consider classic, you have many more quality choices than your heroes ever did. Some of these are thorough, thoughtful, and inventive, while others merely traffic in the aesthetics and buzzwords of that bygone time. I understand and get it, as someone who still appreciates and loves the sounds of Tube Screamers into crunchy British stacks, squishy compressors into clean silverface-era combos, and choppy tremolo and wobbling vibrato. We now have plenty of companies willing to scratch those itches in whatever way suits us.

Meanwhile, the shifting Overton window of gear that players are willing to use for mangling their tone beyond anything we'd capture at an output jack has been getting wider and weirder, and I appreciate that. From Fuzzrocious and Rainger's analog fuzzy smashing to digital exploration by the likes of Dwarfcraft, Alexander, Red Panda, and Meris, I found all kinds of satisfying and curious bleep-bloop-wrawrmp and strange happenings in my pauses and spaces between the notes. It warms my heart to see that along this continuum, my own company's work could now be considered relatively *conservative* by comparison. If your sonic explorations go beyond inoffensively gauzy reverb pads or faux-organ shimmers, there's a lot to find out there.

The genuine connection with peers. For years, I'd admired the work that Tom Cram did in reviving the DOD and DigiTech brands. So to see him going solo with beautiful and rad-sounding work in his new endeavor, Spiral Electric, and to hear that he enjoys and respects our own fuzz as well, means a ton. Another highlight I'll never forget was Paul Reed Smith looking me right in the eyes and telling me that we make one of his favorite modern distortions, and that "you did a really good job on that." But beyond the big names, to meet people firsthand who respect our work, and to hear what it has meant to them, is a big reason why we stay in this business. I mean, it can't be the money. That barely pays for the Z pack we get prescribed for the bronchitis.

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Listen Up—With Your Ears and Your Gut

BY STEVE CARR

STEVE CARR *is the mild-mannered, Midwestern-rooted leader of North Carolina-based Carr Amplifiers. A family man and hi-fi enthusiast with a growing Southern accent, he spins his varied job experiences—roofer, mental hospital orderly, waiter, plumber, cook, t-shirt printer, bicycle salesman, bar owner, and historical building renovator—into designing tube amps.*

Swagger in stereo: A Marantz amplifier/receiver like this survivor gave our columnist his introduction to the qualitative differences in amplified guitar tones.

I've been told I'm a good listener. I've worked at it, and find there is a lot you can learn if you resist the urge to jump in with comments or guesses about what a person who is talking means. That's hard to do, because it's natural to get excited while waiting your turn to speak. But for a musician curious about getting the best from guitar equipment, listening is essential.

Once I started really getting into music, in the mid '70s, I noticed something strange. My parents Soundesign stereo didn't seem as involving as my buddy's dad's Marantz at his place down the street. Listening at home, I wondered, "Where is the guitar, where is the swagger and groove? Could equipment matter?" I needed better sound!

Just after eighth grade, my mom came to the rescue with an unwanted summer job: plumber's helper. It seemed a crime to waste a summer working, though in the end it was worth it, because I purchased a good stereo of my own with nice headphones. This was how my real appreciation of recorded guitar tone began. I spent countless hours lying in bed listening to records and guitars—clean, distorted, in between, you name it—and wondering "How do they get that tone?" I was an armchair engineer, in a way.

As I was getting into bands I had these tone ideals in my head. I was a tone-wanderer, never satisfied, pushing for better and different gear, and occasionally finding really great stuff and then trading it ... with the usual later regret. I listened hard, really focusing on my gear and my friends' gear, growing a catalog of sonic preferences.

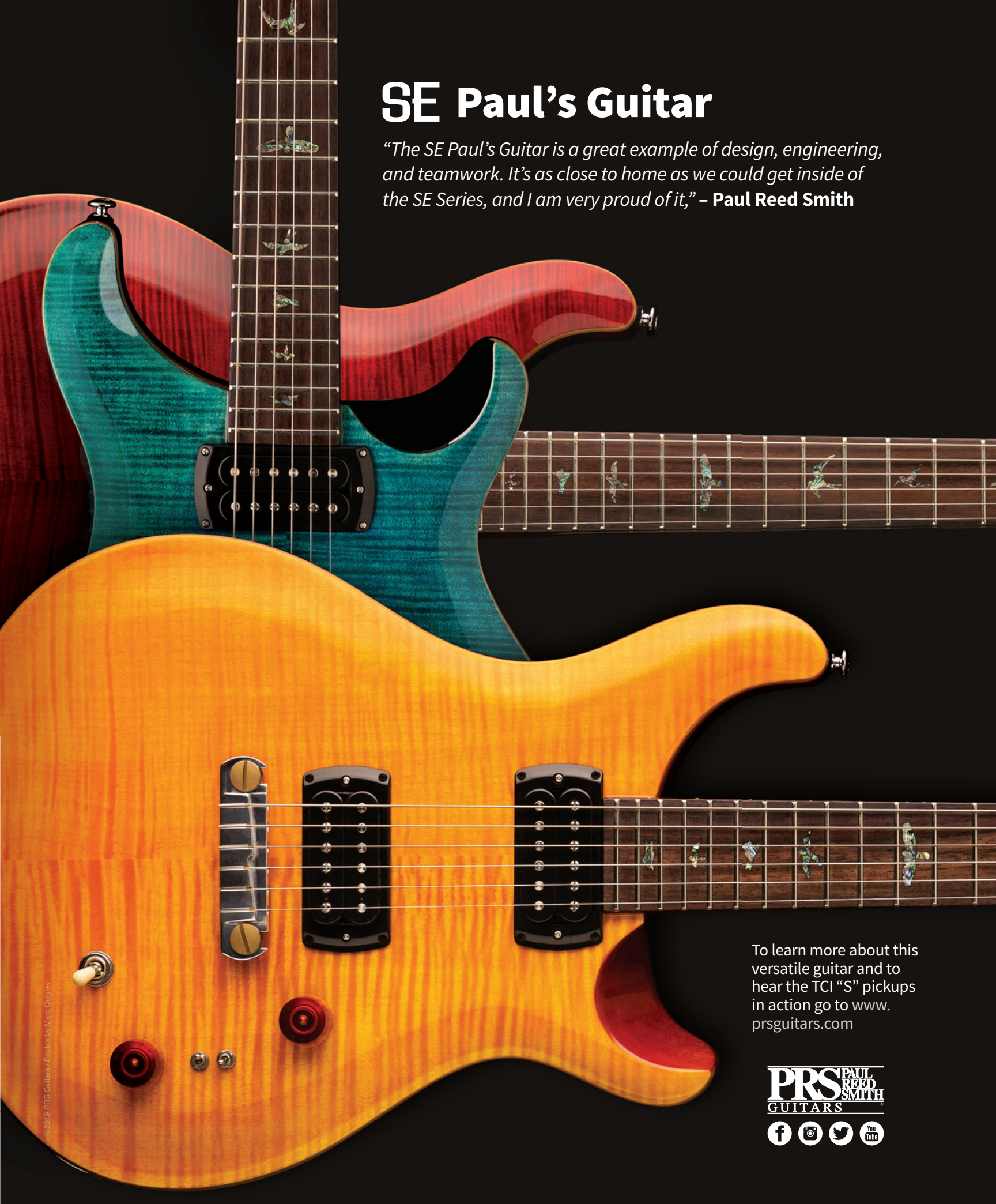
Years later, while I'm prototyping amps, it's much the same as I'm playing and trying circuits, listening and remembering. Feeling the way the amp reacts and how it affects you is a big factor, too. Do you forget yourself for a while? Well, that's great, because making an amp that gets you lost in the sound of your playing means a lot. String definition with bouncy dynamics is what I listen for in amplifiers—the ability for the sound to stop and start with snap. I love hearing the windings on the low strings and how cleans can melt into overdrive. But a great amp tone is not just one thing, and over time you expand your educated personal preferences. Listening is active: It must be practiced so you really learn what you like.

Speaking of folks who know what they like, around 2003, I was in the shop one day when the phone rang. The voice on the other side said, "Hello, this is Eric Johnson and I've been hearing about your amps." Wow, all right! You have my attention! Eric went on to tell me about all the places he's playing. Then, he puts down the phone and plays a live recording he just did. I can't get a word in edgewise, but, as a good listener, I wait him out. Eric comes back to the phone after the 5-minute tune is over and says he needs an amp right away for a new studio album he's about to do. Can we send an amp for him to use, and he will credit us on the record and then either send it back or buy it? It was a long call but exciting, and we decided to divert an amp from a dealer we were shipping to that day. Seemed like a great opportunity for a young company like ours ... but I had a weird feeling.

The box was labeled for UPS and they were coming in an hour. Feeling uneasy, I called David Wilson of *The ToneQuest Report*. David did a story on us back in 2001, he's very friendly, and he also knows Eric Johnson well. I described the telephone encounter to David, and told him the home address Mr. Johnson gave us. Turns out, that was not Eric's address, and apparently Eric was away touring with no recording scheduled. David's advice was "Don't send the amp!"

I ripped the UPS label off the box, and David put me in contact with Eric's manager so I could fill him in. About two weeks went by, and I got another call: from an FBI agent, who wanted to hear every detail of my conversation with "Eric Johnson." It seems the police stopped in on fake Eric and found the house choked with guitars, pedals, and amps—many of them still in shipping boxes from all manner of small boutique makers who'd received similar requests. Interstate fraud, criminal impersonation ... this had become a federal crime. I never found out how the story ended, although the FBI agent said Eric II truly believed he was the *real* Eric Johnson and expressed confusion about why there was a problem. He had gigs to get to and records to record.

The moral: As we all know there is no substitute for experience and some hard knocks. Trust your ears, hands, and, as this case illustrates, gut.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PRS PAUL REED SMITH GUITARS
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The Big Bang

BY STEVEN FRYETTE

STEVEN FRYETTE *is one of the pioneers of multi-channel high-gain amps and tube power amps. He founded VHT Amplification, now Fryette Amplification, is a partner and design engineer in the relaunch of Sound City Amplification, and has played a key role in the design, development, and relaunch of Fane guitar speakers.*

What happens from the moment you pick a guitar string to that instant you're engulfed in amplified sound? It's all about energy transfer: When you pick a string, the energy from the velocity of a pickstroke becomes energy in the form of string vibration. How hard you pick determines how much energy the string will absorb and then transmit to the pickup, which it does by cutting through the pickup's magnetic lines of force. How much voltage is generated by the pickup is proportional to how much skin or fingernail you're willing to sacrifice for the glory of an astounding power chord. Even though there's a practical limit to the voltage generated by the pickup, as determined by the magnet size, wire diameter, and number of turns, there's still a respectable amount of potential to work with, and this gives a typical guitar pickup an insanely wide range of sensitivity: You can move from pounding the strings to delicately brushing them to producing barely measurable voltage output by literally blowing on them.

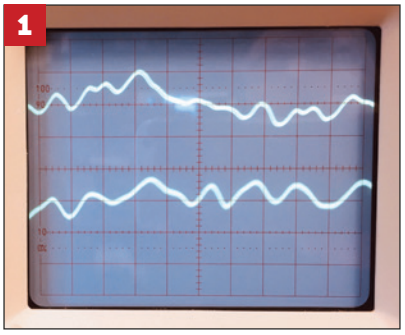
Once you connect your guitar cord to the amplifier, the electrical impulses from the pickup become transformed. Normally, the amplifier's gain will be more than sufficient to accommodate a wide range of signal levels, and this allows us to explore a full spectrum of dynamic interplay. But it takes a special kind of amp to respond *musically* to such a vast range of signal input levels at any given control setting.

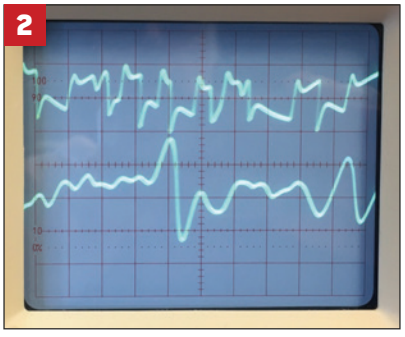
Guitar amplifier gain stages are capable of high sensitivity to very small signals. When an amplifier's preamp stages are set to reproduce small signals, a very large transient attack will readily transition into distortion and overdrive territory. And the same goes for the power amplifier stage. The beauty of this phenomenon is that we can set the amp to respond to subtleties in string attack with the guitar volume set low, and then instantly conjure up a whirlwind of sonic fury on demand.

With a tube amplifier, we usually perceive distortion as pleasant, musical, and inspiring—even essential—and we're often barely aware that we've crossed the threshold from clean to distorted sound. In most tube amps, amplifier distortion is so seamlessly associated with the amp's signature sound that it's not really considered distortion until you're in over-the-top territory. This is because our brain identifies certain flavors or "orders" of distortion harmonics as part of the musical structure, whereas it treats others as alien and filters them out to the extent it can. In extreme cases, this filtering process is inadequate and thus leaves unwelcome harmonics exposed. When this happens, we consider the sound to be harsh, intrusive, and unrelated to the musical content.

There's an elemental difference between a tube guitar amp and other amplifier topologies: In a tube amp, most of the ways it departs from accurate reproduction of the guitar signal are perceived to be additive—they contribute color and complexity to the sonic tapestry. In simple terms, most vintage amps stay cleaner in the preamp, which makes power-amp saturation responsible for the amp's dominant overdriven voice. Modern amps can produce an avalanche of preamp overdrive. We tend to want to amplify this overdrive with clarity in the power-amp stage, and this results in an amp capable of infinite sustain with a high level of detail and articulation. Of course, a myriad of amp designs stake out territory in the infinite space between these two extremes.

And while tube amplifiers are distinguished from one another in large part by how each stage of amplification distorts or colors the sound relative to every other stage, it's too simplistic to say that's all there is to it. Next time, we'll dive deeper into what differentiates tube amps from other topologies, what gives an amplifier it's signature personality, and what gives certain guitar-and-amp combinations their timeless appeal.





These oscilloscope images show the raw pickup output on the bottom compared to the output of a cranked tube amp and speaker on top. In **Photo 1**, *lightly strummed guitar strings result in an even output level between initial string attack and string decay. The top trace shows how the amp reacts to the light attack: You get a fairly clean, even output waveform.*

In **Photo 2**, *the bottom trace shows the same chord, but* slammed. *This generates a very large difference in level between initial string attack (big hump in the middle of the wave) and string decay (smaller humps to the left and right). Here, the top trace shows how the amp with the same control settings as the clean example reacts to the dynamic attack: It flattens the waveform at maximum pickup level and remains in saturation mode, even though pickup output has decreased significantly.*

USED GEAR

Sam Ash

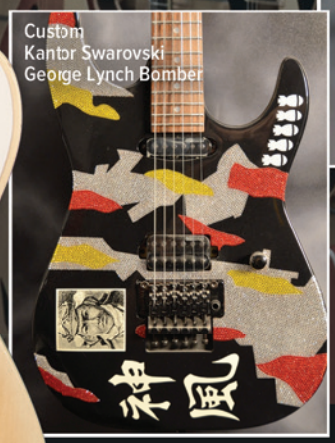
Ibanez
2002 JEM7V

Marshall JCM-2000 TSL 60

Fender '57 Custom Champ

TEYE
El Torero

PRS Vela (2015)


Custom
Kantor Swarovski
George Lynch Bomber

Gibson 2013 '63
ES-335 Block Reissue

Fender
Vintage
1956 Esquire
With Original
Hard Shell Case

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Tuning Apps

When your tuner's acting up, you can't find it, or don't have one (gasp), there are plenty of phone app tuners that feature other built-in goodies, too. Here are 10 apps, with most also having a free version.

1
BOSS

Chromatic Tuner

Featuring the display style of their popular pedal tuner, this app has two different skins to choose from and brings Boss's tuning technology to iOS and Android devices.

Free

boss.info

2
BITCOUNT

Cleartune

Featuring an easy-to-read note-wheel display, this app has selectable temperaments and notations, and reports tuning accuracy of +/- .01 semitone.

$4

bitcount.com

3
FENDER

Tune Player Pack

This enhanced-accuracy tuner with a variety of modes and tunings is part of a tool kit that includes chords, scales, beats, and a metronome.

$5

fender.com

4
YOUSICIAN

GuitarTuna Pro

This customizable app for iOS and Android has over 100 different tunings for 15 instruments and features a variety of tools, including a chord guide, ear training, and other exercises.

$13

guitartuna.com

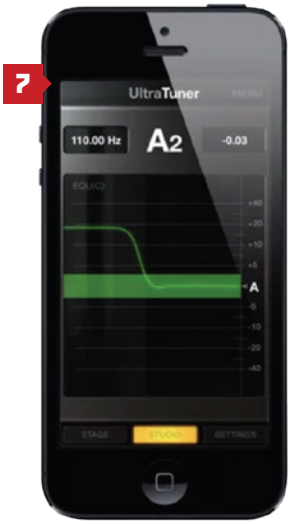
5
EUMLAB

insTuner

This easy-to-use app provides five different tuning modes for different situations, while offering a variety of advanced features.

$4

eumlab.com



6
OTREUS

VITALtuner Pro

This iOS app offers four unique tuning modes, 100 temperaments, and 130 tunings for 40 different instruments.

$15

otreus.com

7
IK MULTIMEDIA

UltraTuner

Providing accurate readings down to .01 of a cent, this app for iOS and Android features tuning modes for stage and studio, as well as tuning history to record variations over time.

$10

ikmultimedia.com

8
N-TRACK SOFTWARE

n-Track Tuner Pro

Featuring six different views to choose from, this app offers both Western and Latin note namings, and the ability to calibrate for non-standard tunings.

$8

ntrack.com

9
PROGUITAR

Pro Guitar Tuner Premium

This chromatic tuner for iOS and Android features a large library of different tunings and provides high-quality samples of real instruments to tune by ear, if that's preferred.

$6

proguitar.com

10
TC ELECTRONIC

PolyTune

Featuring PolyTune technology, which allows all the strings to be strummed and tuned simultaneously, this iOS app can be set for drop tunings up to five semitones down.

$5

tcelectronic.com

Quick Hits

FRIEDMAN
Golden Pearl

BY JASON SHADRICK

Terms like "transparent" and "organic" carry such a stigma that even a mention of those buzzwords sends some jaded gearheads running for the hills. Friedman's Golden Pearl is a low-gain overdrive that lives in that neighborhood, but has enough added features to hopefully break free of those tired and overused descriptors.

Dave Friedman's reputation has been built on the sound of not only heavily modded Marshalls, but his own line of high-gain fire-breathers. The Pearl takes an entirely different route by using a variety of clipping and high-end tweakability to craft everything from barely-broken-up tones to slightly saturated lead sounds. Disclaimer: If you're looking for some scooped metal tones, you might want to move along.

Immediately, I was impressed with the depth of range with the gain knob. Through a clean Fender amp I was able to explore shades of dirt that at times brought to mind Vox-style chime. The real magic is in the two toggle switches, which control hi-cut and clipping type (LED, none, or diode). With a clean amp, I found that the LED and diode settings seem to bring the most out of my T-style Schroeder. I was able to keep plenty of "snap" while using my picking dynamics to push and pull the level of grit. Look past the labels and check out the Golden Pearl, if you live on the modest side of the gain spectrum. PG

TEST GEAR *Schroeder Chopper TL, Gibson Les Paul Custom, Fender Hot Rod Deluxe IV*

RATINGS

Tones	
Ease of Use	
Build/Design	
Value	

$169 street
friedmanamplification.com
Buy on Amazon

PROS Intuitive controls. Rich harmonics. Interactive EQ.

CONS Metalheads need not apply.

Hear a demo now.

One Control
Honey Bee

BY CHARLES SAUFLEY

Bjorn Juhl built the original BJF Honey Bee with the sound of a crunchy Supro amp as his guiding light. Since the coveted 2002 debut version, the Honey Bee has moved through many iterations. This new edition, built by Japan's One Control (and redesigned with Juhl) is the most versatile—gathering most of the many improvements Juhl made to the pedal, including the +6 dB boost in modern mode, and a more wide-ranging EQ control.

The Honey Bee's most striking attribute across most settings is a near perfect blend of oxygen and compression—especially in modern mode. Compared to most popular overdrive types, the Honey Bee seems to dovetail more seamlessly with a given guitar's voice. That doesn't mean it's transparent—Honey Bee is very colorful, with a distortion signature that lives in that perfect space between a silky purr and a throaty growl. To my ears, the closest equivalent in sound and function is a Klon. But Honey Bee has a slightly rawer, leather-tough personality that can make a Klon-style pedal feel uptight and clinical by comparison. Sure, it's expensive. On the other hand, you get a well-built pedal, derived from a truly great design that could relegate all your other low- to mid-gain pedals to the shelf. PG

TEST GEAR *Fender Telecaster Deluxe with Curtis Novak Widerange pickups, Fender Jazzmaster, '68 Fender Bassman, Fender Vibro Champ*

RATINGS

Tones	
Ease of Use	
Build/Design	
Value	

$219 street
one-control.com

PROS Beautiful combination of oxygen and compression. Useful variations in vintage and modern mode. Makes a fantastic low-gain boost.

CONS Compression at highest gain levels in modern mode sucks air and dynamic range.

Hear a demo now.

ADVENTURE AUDIO
Glacial Zenith II

BY SHAWN HAMMOND

It's somewhat surprising that, in 2019, so many dirt boxes still shortchange your ability to tweak the guitar's primary frequency range—the mids—often either forcing dependence on a single tone control, or splitting mid precision between treble and bass knobs. Luckily, Adventure Audio's Glacial Zenith II is part of a slowly growing set serving up a healthy range of segmented control over all three bands—not to mention handy routing options for placing the EQ and/or the independently footswitchable boost circuit before or after the drive section. A shape toggle also lets you voice the dirt side to be crisply articulate, or smoother, with a somewhat amp-like sag when you dig in.

Even better, the GZII's EQ knobs are wonderfully voiced: There's a very versatile aural range to play in, yet even maxed treble and mid settings don't sound harsh. (Pushing bass past 3 or 4 o'clock got a little tubby with my baritone 6-string's dual guitar-and-bass-amp setup, but a more thumping bass amp would likely love the extra subs.) Most impressively, the various switching options allowed a single guitar (my 28"-scale, B-tuned Squier) to make a plethora of stops between Sonic Youth-style indie jangle and seething metal sounds that still allowed the unique character of the Wide Range-style pickups to shine through. PG

TEST GEAR *Eastwood Sidejack Baritone DLX and baritone Squier/ Warmoth "Jazzblaster" (both with Curtis Novak Jazzmaster Widerange pickups), MXR Reverb, Jaguar HC50 and Fender Rumble 200 amps*

RATINGS

Tones	4½
Ease of Use	4
Build/Design	4
Value	4½

$189 street
adventurepedals.com

PROS Fantastic array of tones for guitar, baritone, or bass—from warm and gushy to sparkling to bristling, singing high gain.

CONS Knobs easily bumped to unintended positions when adjusting crowded control panel.

Hear a demo now.

MXR
Vintage Bass Octave

BY RICH OSWEILER

Housed in a tough, mini-format enclosure, MXR's Vintage Bass Octave makes simple work of going subterranean with a three-knob control set that takes obvious cues from the lauded but discontinued Boss OC-2. There's Oct 1 (one octave down), Oct 2 (two octaves down), and Dry level. However, the company's new octaver also manages to squeeze in the handy addition of a mid-boost switch.

The range of sounds and applications with the Vintage Bass Octave are wide, whether you're after a slight thickening of your tone, power-chord-like beef, or a stew of sub-low, synthy space funk. The tracking is impressive for an analog octaver. With the Oct 1 control dimed, my notes were holding all the way down to the 4th string's 1st fret before glitching, which is oftentimes deep into no man's land with an octaver.

The aforementioned mid switch bumps the midrange of the clean signal by 6 dB at 800 Hz, but it can be increased to 13 dB via an internal trim pot. The analog pedal's warm and rubbery subs are fantastic, but it's nice to have this boost feature for some more mid point and growl to punch through—especially when going double deep with the Oct 2 control. Plus, even without the octave effect engaged, you have a clean mid bump at the ready when the situation calls for it. And while fun on their own, the Vintage Bass Octave's subs would just love a play date with your favorite dirt pedal. PG

TEST GEAR *Fender Precision, late-'70s Epiphone Scroll prototype, Gallien-Krueger 800RB, Orange OBC212, Focusrite Scarlett 2i4*

RATINGS

Tones	4½
Ease of Use	4½
Build/Design	4½
Value	4

$159 street
jimdunlop.com
Buy on Amazon

PROS Small footprint, impressive tracking, mid-boost switch.

CONS Love the small size, but the knob trio is mighty tight.

Hear a demo now.

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ELECTRO-HARMONIX
Grand Canyon

By Joe Gore

WATCH THE REVIEW DEMO NOW.

Electro-Harmonix has been concocting delay pedals since their original Memory Man debuted in 1976. They're still at it after 43 years. Their new Grand Canyon Delay & Looper is a sophisticated echo machine offering high-res audio and 13 delay modes, including a full-featured looper. These and other features make it a rival to such top-flight delay pedals as Strymon's TimeLine, Eventide's TimeFactor, and Source Audio's Nemesis. But Grand Canyon is less costly than any of those options.

A Dozen Delays

The Grand Canyon's core sound quality is excellent. Echoes are smooth and detailed, devoid of graininess or harsh resonance. The edit parameters excel at capturing the lo-fi color and quirks of vintage delay units. Sonic options range from pristine echoes to warts-and-all emulations of Echoplex-style tape delay, EchoRec-style drum delay, and EHX's own Deluxe Memory Man, an analog bucket-brigade delay. Additional settings exploit such digital effects as bit-crushed distortion, pitch-shifting, reverse playback, and infinite reverb.

The pedal's delay-type knob selects from 13 delay algorithms. Alongside it are a pair of mini-knobs that control two editable parameters per mode. In the default echo mode, for example, the mini-knobs specify the wet signal's EQ and introduce bit-crushed distortion. In doubling mode, the mini-knobs set the offset time and pitch spread (basically, the effect's "thickness").

This arrangement provides much sonic variation, even before you get to the pedal's system-wide controls. These include standard delay time, wet/dry mix, and feedback controls. (The knobs assume different functions in loop mode, discussed below.) There's a tap-tempo footswitch, plus a row of mini-pushbuttons that control such variables as rhythmic subdivisions of tap-tempo speed and whether delay tails continue to sound after you bypass the effect. Another button activates momentary mode, where the effect is active only while the on/off switch is pressed. This is great for choking off anarchic feedback squalls right on the beat.

This control layout is fairly sensible. But since all control labels are in miniscule script in muted, low-contrast colors, they can be difficult to read even with the pedal close to your face. Unless you have superhuman vision, don't count on being able to read anything when standing above a pedalboard.

Stereo Spread

The Grand Canyon sounds lovely in both mono mode (**Clip 1**) and in stereo (**Clip 2**). Press the ping-pong mini-button in stereo mode and the delays skitter between hard left and hard right—a dramatic and animated effect. Once you've created a cool sound, you can store it in

one of Grand Canyon's 13 memory slots. There's a limitation, though: You can only store one of each effect type. You can't, for example, store two contrasting tape delay settings.

Another mini-button activates expression mode. No expression pedal is included, but you'll probably want one. In the pedal's default state, a connected pedal controls one pre-selected parameter per delay mode. But with editing, you can manipulate any number of onscreen controls, define their ranges, and save desired settings for the pedal's heel-down and toe-down positions. This is a powerful and potentially creative feature. Unfortunately, you can't switch between delay types via expression pedal. For hands-free program changes, you must connect an external footswitch—and yeah, you'll probably want one of those, too, particularly if you plan to use the Grand Canyon's looper.

Switch Craft

Technically, you can use the looper without external switches, especially if you don't change settings between overdubs. But to overdub contrasting sounds, different delay types, or access features like reverse or undo, you must memorize a complex set of single-tap, double-tap, and long-tap motions.

It all gets much easier with a 3-switch controller connected. (I used DigiTech's FS3X.) The ergonomics still aren't ideal. For example, the footswitch's functions change between delay and loop mode, and you must often toggle between the two while overdubbing. Also, when you tap the all-important record/play footswitch, your foot obscures three important status LEDs. But while operation is sometimes awkward, I suspect most players can master the system with a bit of focused practice.

The Verdict

The Grand Canyon offers a wealth of delay sounds and functions at a relatively humble price. The sound quality is excellent in mono, and, well, *grand* in stereo. With its many controls and tiny labels, the pedal is sometimes tricky to use. But with patience and practice, players can summon countless cool colors.

RATINGS

Tones	
Ease of Use	
Build/Design	
Value	

PROS Many excellent delay tones in mono and stereo. Sophisticated expression and footswitch control. Stores 13 sounds. Powerful single-channel looper. Adapter included. Good value.

CONS Hard-to-read labels. Operation can be complex.

$249 street

ehx.com

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SCHECTER
SLS Elite-4

By Steve Cook

WATCH THE REVIEW DEMO NOW.

Schecter Guitar Research has been championing the "not scared" column for a while now with their forward designs, and in the process has garnered love from players ranging from funk and rock icons to modern shred and metal players. They've recently been introducing many new designs that push even their own elevated standards to new heights. One such instrument is the SLS Elite-4, a formidable member of Schecter's Diamond Series that boasts a boutique-bass vibe in an off-the-rack offering. The SLS Elite-4 is crafted in South Korea and packed with goodies that will satisfy the discerning player looking for high-end components, slick playability, and modern appointments.

Where the Elite Meet

Before I even start on the bass, let me say that its case (sold separately for $139) has black hardware. It's not a huge deal, but, man, after staring at stainless latches all my life, the black is a nice, cool change. Once I opened the molded case, I was greeted by a stunning bass finished in what I would call an atypical brown burst, which starts dark around the bridge area and then blossoms at the horns in a pretty, blonde finish. The Elite-4 is not heavy, at just a touch over 8 1/2 pounds, and the narrow "C" neck had me giddy from the jump.

The SLS Elite-4 quickly charmed me with its interesting materials and construction. The

combination of the figured flame-maple top with a slight arch and ivory binding really sells the beauty of the bass. And after flipping the Elite-4 over, a sweet triple-stripe of walnut and padauk is revealed, sandwiched between the swamp ash on the body and the maple on the neck.

The Schecter designers built in some other terrific features, such as the offset abalone inlay markers that reverse after the 12th fret. The 24-fret design provides full access to the upper realm, the bridge can be top loaded or strung though, and I was treated to super-fast action thanks to the perfect factory setup.

For pickups, Schecter went with Fishman Fluence Soapbars, which have some spectrum to them. The sound is controlled by a 2-band Fishman EQ, a blend knob, and a volume knob that pulls double duty as a push/pull coil splitter. There's also a 3-way toggle for switching between classic, funk, or modern voicings.

So Many Choices

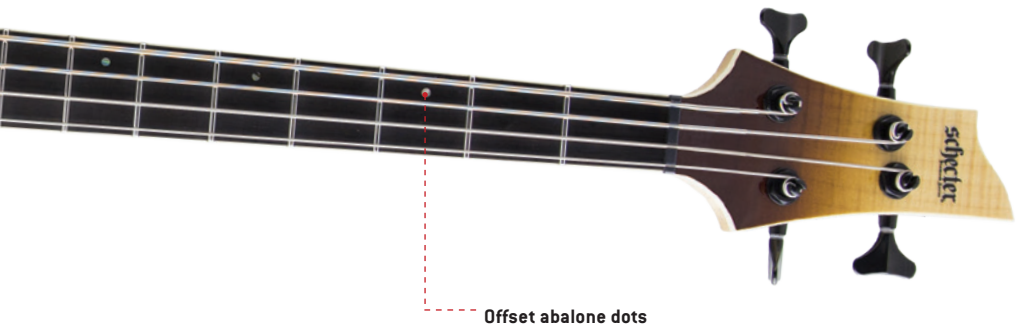
After plugging the bass into an Eden Terra Nova with a matching Eden 2x10 cabinet, I set the EQ flat and the switch to classic (position 1) with both pickups engaged and blended equal. This initial tone was a bit subdued, so I went to the onboard fixers. First, I experimented with the 3-way switch, which provides a mid scoop in the funk position and a mid-boost in the modern position. The modern setting helped my initial setting the most, and the bass really jumped alive when I tapped to single-coil. I went back through the settings with the coil split, and even with the output slightly diminished, I liked the tone better. I loved the funk preset with the single-coil engaged, and probably could have played this setting all night.

I hadn't even gotten started with the onboard EQ at that point. The two independent EQ controls on the Fishman preamp push the tonal realm of the bass into a new place. The Elite-4 needs a decent amount of bass and treble boost to dial in some really nice definition, and once it's there, the tone is great. The bass control does an excellent job in boosting the low end and rounding out the signal. I found the modern setting and its overall mid-boost approach to be a bit too throaty for me in this configuration. For the modern voicing, I preferred pushing the volume knob back in and easing the bass up a bit to get a more balanced sound.

Again, it was the funk voicing with the single-coil setting that conquered the day. With the voicing dipping out the mids, the bass felt and sounded like a souped-up Jazz, yet went further than that—becoming a refined instrument with charm and manners. Paired with the speediness of the neck and grace of the body, I was playing all the fun licks (and way too fast, I might add).

The Verdict

I appreciate the refinements of the SLS Elite-4. The body is gorgeous, and the little things like the binding and the easy access to the dual action truss rod are small examples of user-friendly design and execution. On the tonal side, the mids could be a bit harsh at times, for my taste. The ebony fretboard offsets this. However, it's possible the combination of the maple and swamp ash could be pushing the brightness meter up high on the instrument. All that said, one can easily dial up whatever's needed in no time with the onboard Fishman pre. Along with its solid construction and features, the SLS Elite-4 is a fine instrument that will provide years of great playing.



RATINGS

Tones	
Playability	
Build/Design	
Value	

PROS Well built. Fantastic neck.

CONS The throaty mids tend to sit in the wrong frequencies for my taste.

$1,259 street

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PREMIER GEAR

IK MULTIMEDIA
iRig Stomp I/O

By Joe Gore

HEAR A DEMO NOW.

It's been 17 years since Italy's IK Multimedia launched their AmpliTube modeling software, which remains a popular choice among guitarists. Meanwhile, the company has created a long line of hardware tools designed to communicate with your computer or iOS device. Their latest is the iRig Stomp I/O, which does double duty as an audio interface and MIDI foot controller. With its built-in hardware tray, the device is ideal for iPads and iPhones running AmpliTube CS, the mobile edition version of IKM's flagship software.

Freedom of Choice

A free app, AmpliTube CS includes only a modest number of modeled amps and effects. But registering the iRig Stomp I/O unlocks a suite of eight amp models, nine cabinets, and 17 stompbox effects. You also get a copy of AmpliTube 4 Deluxe, the computer-based version. It's a deeper program that includes roughly three times as many models as CS. The IKM store offers many additional models, including officially licensed content from big-name artists and manufacturers.

But you don't need to use IKM software to make good use of the iRig Stomp I/O. Since the rocker pedal and footswitches transmit MIDI data, you can control anything that responds to MIDI commands: rival amp modeling software, hardware modelers, DAWs, and many other things. There are also two jacks for connecting external controller switches or pedals (not included).

So before talking about using the iRig Stomp I/O with IKM software, let's consider it simply as an interface and controller, regardless of the software or hardware you use it with.

Built to Bash

This is a stout piece of gear, with a rugged steel housing, high-quality switches, and a substantial-feeling wah-style treadle. All jacks are plastic, yet they seem relatively sturdy. I'd have no qualms

using the iRig Stomp I/O on big stages or in intense studio situations.

The pedalboard's A/D convertors sound fab. Tones are sparkly, present, and suitable for professional use. The device supports audio at 16- and 24-bit depth, and sample rates up to 96 kHz. It interfaces with iOS devices via Apple Lightning cable, and your device charges while connected. Alternately, you can connect to a computer with a USB cable. (Both cables are included.) Or you can transmit audio and MIDI the old-fashioned way, through a stereo pair of 1/4" jacks and traditional MIDI in and out ports. The combo 1/4"/XLR input jack also accommodates microphones, and there's 24-volt phantom power for use with condenser mics.

In other words, this tough little interface/controller has many possible uses even if you don't use IKM software. It could be especially handy (footy?) in a laptop-based mobile studio.

Enter AmpliTube

I tested the iRig Stomp I/O and recorded the demo clips using a 2017 Apple iPad Pro running AmpliTube CS for iPad. For review purposes, I confined myself to the included amp, cab, and effects models.

Every modeling platform has a personality. At risk of over-generalizing, AmpliTube specializes in high-gain tones suitable for metal and heavy rock. Oh, you can get good clean sounds, but there are far more options when it comes to the aggro stuff. Overall, AmpliTube tones tend toward brightness, which is great for adding clarity to potentially dark-sounding high-output pickups. (I don't own any extra-hot pickups, so I recorded the clips using a DIY guitar with vintage-output Firebird pickups.) In any case, there's more than enough control to fine-tune the response to your pickups of choice.

My biggest disappointments are the reverbs. Only two are available, and they can sound cakey and artificial. But that's nothing that a couple of bucks can't fix, since other reverbs are available from the IKM store. (The Fender-licensed spring reverb is particularly sweet.)

Perfect Vision

AmpliTube CS for iPad is a masterful bit of UI design. If you can't discern the controls while standing above the pedalboard, you have no business operating a motor vehicle. The app has two operation modes, each with a lucid display.

In stomp mode, the switches and pedal control the virtual stompboxes. In stomp mode you'll probably use the footswitches mainly to activate and bypass effects, but the treadle has many uses other than simply being a wah controller. It can control any combination of AmpliTube parameters. (You might, for example, increase the level and feedback of a delay effect while altering the intensity of a stereo pan effect and goosing overdrive gain.) And since most modern music software supports assignable MIDI commands, you can pretty much control anything on anything.

In live mode, you use the footswitches to select presets, change program banks, and activate a huge, easy-to-read tuner. The pedal does whatever you've previously instructed it to do. You can switch between stomp and live modes from the pedalboard.

The Verdict

IK Multimedia's iRig Stomp I/O is a reassuringly rugged MIDI foot controller and a good-sounding audio interface. With its hardware tray and included software, it's ideal for iOS devices running AmpliTube CS. But you don't have to be an AmpliTube fan—the device is suited to any recording or performing scenario that benefits from a good audio converter and/or a sturdy set of foot controllers. Considering its fine sound, quality build, and vast utility, it's a good deal at $299.

RATINGS

Tones	4.5
Ease of Use	4.5
Build/Design	5
Value	5

PROS Good-sounding audio interface. Rugged build. Works with most music software. Nice price.

CONS Installing and configuring AmpliTube CS software can be tricky. You may need add-on models if your focus isn't hard rock/metal.

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ikmultimedia.com
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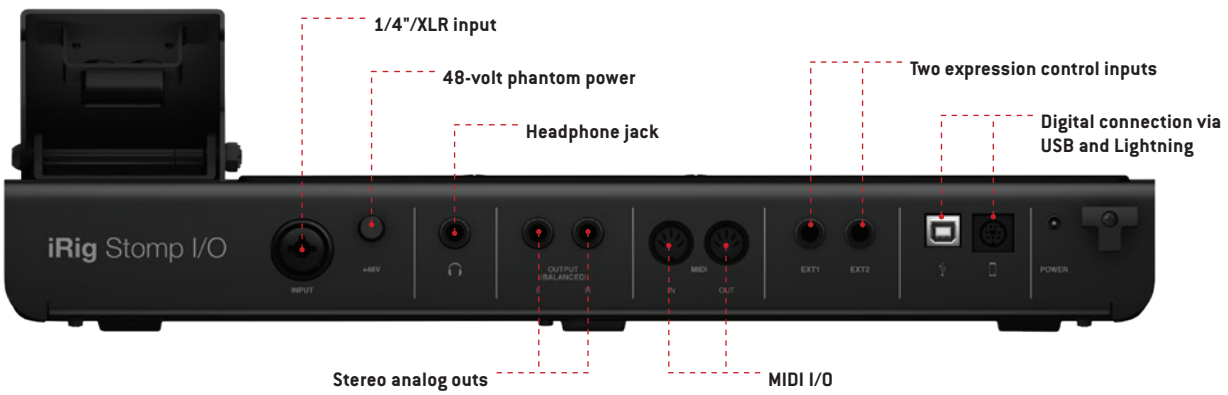

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PREMIER GEAR

SOURCE AUDIO
True Spring

By Charles Saufley

WATCH THE REVIEW DEMO NOW.

Though it's harder than ever to nitpick the sonic authenticity of good digital effects, there's little arguing that spring reverb, with its complex clanging overtones and electro-mechanical *je nais se quoi*, remains tough to emulate via code. Still, pedal designers keep honing in on the sound of the real thing. And while Source Audio's True Spring isn't the first digital spring reverb-modeling stompbox, few have closed the digital/analog authenticity gap with so much utility and attention to the variation in spring reverb types.

The True Spring features excellent models of short- and long-tank reverbs, and a Fender-style tank emulation. But it's also stuffed with extra features, including superb tremolo models derived from Source Audio's excellent Vertigo tremolo pedal, additional downloadable reverb models that range from cheap and trashy-sounding to lush, and customizability via Source Audio's Neuro app that can help you subtly tailor the pedal to your rig.

Reverb Sauce Reduction

At just less than 2 3/4" wide and about 4 1/2" long, the True Spring is barely bigger than a Boss pedal. And its four-knob array for mix, dwell, effect level, and tone, and spring-type toggle, really couldn't be more intuitive.

But there's a tradeoff for this design economy. The compact size means there are no dedicated controls for the tremolo on the pedal face. Source Audio executed a smart middle-road solution to the problem: depressing the small input control button on the pedal's crown momentarily converts the reverb's dwell and tone knobs to tremolo depth and rate controls. You can also change the function of the toggle switch, enabling selection of optical, bias, and brownface-style harmonic tremolo circuit emulations. Executing this operation is simple in isolation. But even the act of turning the tremolo on and off mid-performance is tricky if you don't have the optional Source Audio Tap Switch. The switch itself is compact and about 2 1/4" wide and 2 1/2" tall. It can be assigned to control tremolo bypass and tap tempo. Why didn't Source Audio just make the True Spring a bit wider to accommodate a second footswitch and controls for the tremolo? If you use few pedals, the design compromise probably makes less sense. For busier boards, the compact footswitch arguably offers more layout flexibility.

The True Spring's design economy extends to the single USB port on the pedal crown, which you use to interface with the desktop Neuro editor and for MIDI control of the pedal.

Wet and Wild Variations

It's a testament to the ears of Source Audio's engineers that True Spring sounds better and more colorful the louder you play.

The short spring reverb is the most succinct in terms of attack overtones and trails, which means you can dial up very intense reverb tones without overwhelming other harmonic colors in your instrument and amplifier. The punchy, less sprawling tone picture also makes it a nice match for fuzz, which can be a messy pair in spite of their vast theoretical psychedelic potential.

The long spring setting has darker, more cave-like overtones and an explosive, dripping-wet attack. It has the most metallic overtones, which can obscure picking and harmonic nuance much more than the other two settings. I preferred the long spring sounds at subtle dwell settings, where

the clanging overtones could tuck in alongside other harmonic elements in the signal. But it's a great setting if you want to be perversely clear about the fact you're using vintage reverb flavor.

The tank reverb setting is beautiful, and it's arguably the True Spring's centerpiece. It also helps you understand why reverb and surf music and iconography are so naturally intertwined. The trailing overtones are effervescent and pleasantly granular, sounding uncannily like the hiss of a wave's last tendrils receding across the sand. And while tank reverb has a reputation as the most intense spring-reverb type, it feels more complex and subtle in many respects than the long tank engine. The trails have more organic overtones, and though there is less radical range in the tone control, the more nuanced color shifts from dark to bright make tailoring a reverb sound for a given amp, guitar, or mix a pleasure.

The level control provides up to 6 dB of boost, adding extra presence to super-blown-out reverb echoes that can obscure individual notes, chords, and melodies. It also lends a cool reverb-tinged and slightly dirty boost when you minimize the mix.

The tremolo effects, meanwhile, are lovely. The optical tremolo, associated with Fender's bigger blackface amps, is the choppiest of the bunch. It's killer for accenting chugging rhythm patterns and propulsive strumming. The beautiful brownface-style harmonic setting is colored with subtle pitch-shifting effects that smooth the waveforms and add a sleepy, shifting undercurrent that beautifully accents languid chord melodies. The bias tremolo strikes a sort of middle ground between the two, generating pitch-regular rhythmic pulses with smoother contours.

The Verdict

The quality of the True Spring's reverb tones is superb. And given that real spring reverbs exhibit considerable differences—even among the same type—the True Spring is remarkable for the many ways in which is manages authenticity. The lack of a dedicated control set for the excellent tremolo effects will be a bummer for some. But on the whole, the True Spring is a smart compromise between size, power, price, and functionality.

RATINGS

Tones	
Ease of Use	
Build/Design	
Value	

PROS Super-authentic, immersive spring-reverb tones. Much attention paid to subtle differences among reverb types. Neuro app provides flexible editing options.

CONS Small footprint means several clicks to get to many powerful features.

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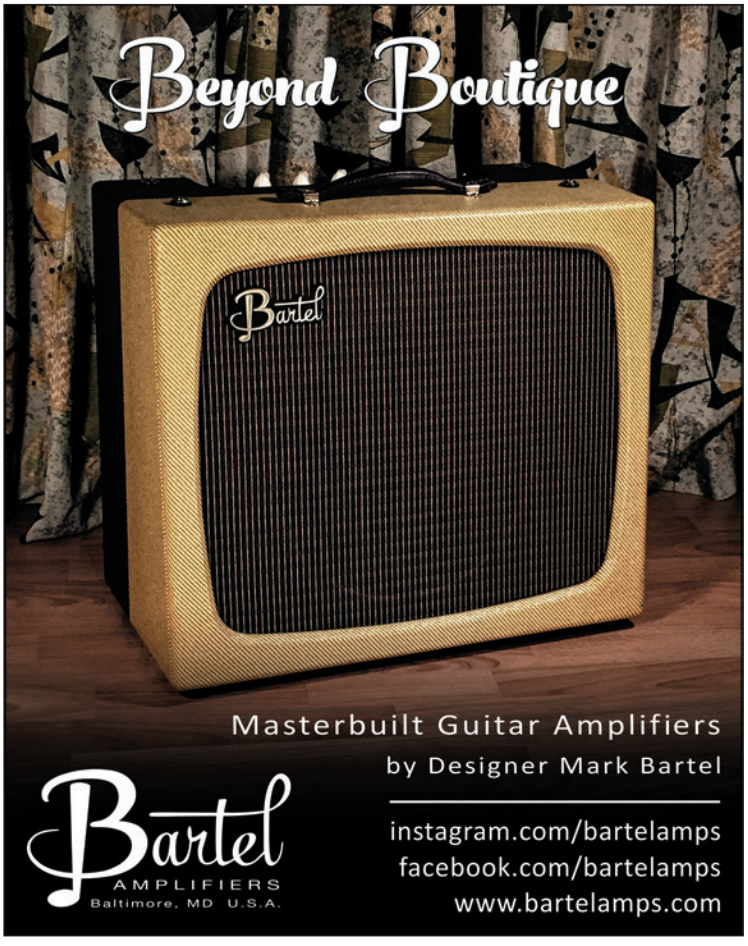

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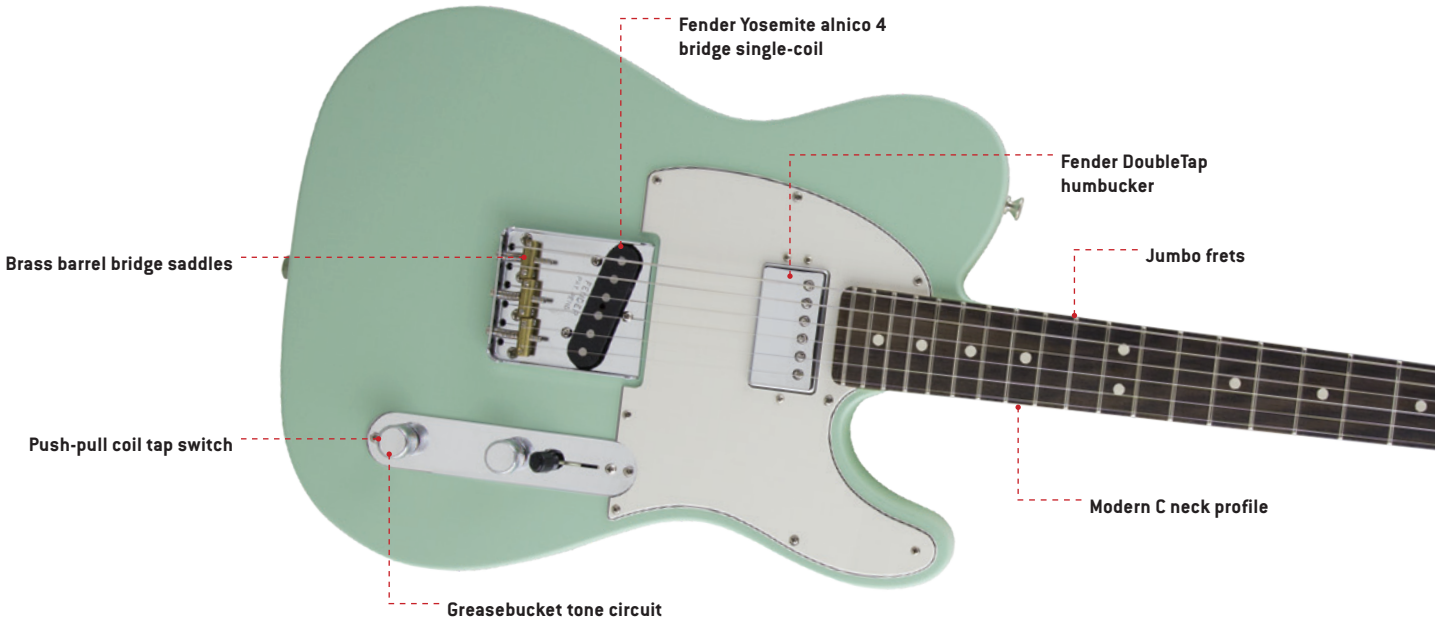
FENDER
American Performer Telecaster Hum

By Charles Saufley

WATCH THE REVIEW DEMO NOW.

Players have been modding electric guitars since, well ... since there were electric guitars. But the Telecaster neck-humbucker conversion was one of the first mods to become relatively commonplace. It's hard to pinpoint who did it first. Keith Richards' humbucker'd Telecasters, which were converted by Ted Newman Jones in 1972, may be the most famous. But Stones chum and soul belter extraordinaire Terry Reid rocked a butterscotch Telecaster with a PAF at Glastonbury the previous summer. And Steve Marriott switched his Telecaster's neck pickup out for a Bill Lawrence-designed True Sound pickup when he was still with the Small Faces a few years earlier. Clearly a lot of players were looking for a little extra oomph from their otherwise perfect Fullerton slabs. And by '72, even Fender themselves would be stuffing Telecasters with humbuckers in the guise of the Deluxe and Custom.

Wherever that path's origins, it's led us to this evolutionary incarnation of the Telecaster, the American Performer Telecaster Hum. But while the neck-position humbucker is the most overt modification to the traditional Tele template, it's far from the only feature that sets this newest Telecaster apart. There's a new Yosemite-series single-coil pickup in the bridge position, a Greasebucket tone circuit that attenuates high end without enhancing lows or reducing gain, and a coil-split switch that makes the neck humbucker a best-of-both-worlds single-coil/humbucker hybrid. Needless to say, none of these mods are brand new ideas, save for the new alnico 4 Yosemite single-coil bridge pickup. But gathered together in an alder-bodied, U.S.A.-built Tele for a little more than a grand, they add up to a very good value in a genuinely versatile and different instrument.



Mod-Mad Mash Up

The American Performer's mix of vintage, slightly less vintage, and contemporary elements sometimes feels like a mutation of Telecasters from many decades somehow made into a cohesive whole. And apart from the finish and shiny new hardware, it also has the cool, customized feel of a guitar that's been chopped, routed, tweaked, and slimmed to suit an individual player's evolving tastes over time: jumbo frets here, vintage brass saddles there, a push-pull tone pot, and a 9.5" radius neck that feels like it was expertly planed to facilitate some rocker's Jimmy Page string-bending fantasies. Yet despite all these somewhat disparate design elements, the guitar feels like a very cohesive whole.

Attention to detail is evident everywhere. The finish is impeccable, the fretwork is excellent, and the maple neck is shaped with a nice roll at the edges—eliminating the sharp-edged feel you experience on some flatter-radius necks. The neck profile is a shape that Fender calls the "modern C," and it's a fairly significant deviation from vintage norms. Compared to a 7.25" radius vintage C, it's wider, flatter, and perhaps a little bit less thick. For players with smaller hands, the profile might make complex chording more difficult than on a vintage Fender. It might also feel odd to players who prefer the profile of a '60s Fender and the many vintage reissues that emulate that shape. But there is no denying the bend-happy playability derived from the combination of the flatter radius and jumbo frets.

Telecaster Tangents

The American Performer's capacity for sonic sleight-of-hand is impressive. Plug it in, start picking, and you'll hear scads of sounds you wouldn't hesitate to call classic Telecaster. Play the American Performer alongside a '60s-spec Telecaster, though, and you'll hear profound differences. The Yosemite bridge pickup, which uses wax-potted alnico 4 magnets in place of vintage-style alnico 5 magnets, is airier with just a bit less body, growl, and aggression than the '60s-spec pickups in my own alder, maple-neck Telecaster, and other vintage specimens I have played. But it's a great tone profile for pedal-happy players, lending headroom for overdrives and fuzz and a less boomy voice that helps highlight overtones and harmonics in heavy delay and reverb blends.

The alnico 4 DoubleTap humbucker, meanwhile, is mellow and even-tempered in terms of both output and tonal-spectrum balance. It's not too hot—presumably to better blend with the airy Yosemite single-coil—and it's less loud than modern PAFs or Fender's own original Wide Range humbucker. In coil-tapped mode you hear less low end, but the output doesn't sound considerably thinner or exhibit the almost out-of-phase sounding fragility that plagues some coil-tapped humbuckers. In both modes, the neck pickup blends beautifully with the bridge unit, creating a jangly, wide-screen tone picture that ranges from jazz-mellow to spanky, depending on how you set up the Greasebucket tone circuit. Output balance between the pickups is excellent too. (Resistance measurements for the two pickups are nearly identical: 7.9k ohm for the Yosemite bridge and 8k ohm for the DoubleTap.) And the relative civility and high headroom of the pickups make the American Performer a great match for big amps that magnify the bloom and nuanced overtone picture from both pickups.

The Verdict

Though many of the American Performer Telecaster Hum's outward visual cues suggest a vintage alignment, this is very much a modern player's instrument. The tones and switching all seem designed to accommodate the needs of contemporary effect-centric playing. And the neck profile, fretboard radius, and jumbo frets make the guitar feel much different than a '60s or early-'70s Telecaster.

But for all the differences, the American Performer Telecaster Hum does all the things a Telecaster traditionally does very well. And again, most of the deviations from vintage norms are refinements of mods that players have been making to vintage Telecasters since the '60s. Where the American Performer Telecaster Hum fits into your world is really down to how strongly you align with rawer vintage tones and how the neck feels in your fretting hand. Either way, the American Performer is an intriguing alternative in a ever-evolving Fender line that admirably offers options for many kinds of players.

RATINGS

Tones	
Playability	
Build/Design	
Value	

PROS Top-notch build quality. Nice humbucker tones. Well-balanced pickups.

CONS Contemporary neck profile and fretboard radius might put off players with vintage Fender inclinations.

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PREMIER GEAR

JEXT TELEZ
Black Drone Wasp

By Charles Saufley

HEAR A DEMO NOW.

I'll admit, when the Jext Telez Black Drone Wasp landed at my door, I wasn't in a very fuzzy mood. Music and moods take you to funny places. And though I had been excited about this release, I worried I wasn't fired up with enough of the requisite adolescent emotion or the smash-stuff-up mindset it takes to appreciate a fuzz that can be measured in mega tonnage. Boy, did that change when I plugged it in.

The Black Drone Wasp is Jext Telez's first original design. And after executing superb takes on the Selmer Buzz Tone and even the distortion and filter sections of the Vox Conqueror amp, among others, my expectations were high. The three-transistor, germanium Black Drone Wasp lives up to those expectations—and then some. It possesses world-destroying, high-gain fuzz potency and a buzzy, sometimes sonorous, mostly menacing fundamental voice peppered with Sovtek Big Muff mass, Foxx Tone Machine octave complexity, and a Fuzz Face's top-end heat. It also bubbles over with many unique, super-heavy sounds and colorful tones that are hard to pinpoint in relation to other fuzzes.

Streamlined for Savagery

The wasp graphic on the front of the pedal says much about the BDW's design intent. That's good because there is precious little else to tell you what the streamlined control set does. The three toggles are dedicated to bias switching, bass cut, and treble cut, though the graphics say nothing specific about which is which. (I'm pretty sure the graphics under the cut controls represent dips on an EQ band.) The two knobs are for a master volume (logically labeled "V") and a gain/fuzz control more mysteriously labeled "S." (For sting?)

Individually, none of the controls shift the basic voice too drastically. Manipulating the toggles delivers the most overt tone shifts. But the gain control basically goes from fuzzy to extremely fuzzy, while the master volume goes from loud to speaker-vaporizingly loud. Still, there are many complex and interesting tones within the Wasp's palette.

Like every Jext Telez pedal I've encountered, the BDW is built with high attention to detail and carefully selected components. Gain comes from three new-old-stock RCA 2N404 transistors, which, as far as I can tell, are not especially common in fuzz circuits (though perhaps they should be). Orange Drop capacitors are used for the frequency-cut sections of the circuit. Everything is tidily situated on a through-hole circuit board, and I/O jacks and the footswitch are chassis mounted. There's a 9V battery option too.

Primal Potency, Civilized Sheen

The Black Drone Wasp is loud. Very loud. And I'd be surprised if it wasn't the loudest pedal on most boards. If you're out to conquer your bandmates in a volume arms race, it might be your best bet. But while the BDW is loud, it doesn't suffer from the narrow-spectrum, monochromatic tone palette that plagues many high-output pedals.

The basic fuzz voice is complex, with a pleasing harmonic makeup that's surprisingly even across the EQ spectrum. Bass tones are predictably massive but don't overwhelm. (The BDW also sounds awesome with bass guitar.) The midrange is pleasing to the ear too. It doesn't have any of the dry, ear-fatiguing brashness that loud pedals sometimes possess in this frequency range. Instead, midrange tones are contoured around the edges and fill space in gradient colors rather than primary-hued blocks. The top-end output is the most interesting and impressive facet of the BDW's voice, particularly given the pedal's volume.

I'd guess it's the effervescent, percolating buzz in this high-mid to high-frequency range that inspired the pedal's name. It's very pronounced, and at certain settings it's almost the dominant characteristic of the pedal's voice (which says a lot, given the low-frequency thump and growl in the midrange). Like many of the pedal's most overt sonic signatures, the fuzz, and the top-end heat that reinforce it, are present without being tiring.

If that stew wasn't already tasty enough, there's also a discernable touch of lower octave. It's a little like the octave presence in a Sovtek Big Muff—stronger perhaps, but still tucked tastefully behind the very balanced whole. The harmonic sum of all this is impressive. And at the right settings, the pedal has almost symphonic balance, or the depth of a freshly tuned, well-intonated 12-string guitar.

If you're keen on shifting this balance, you can do it easily with the three toggles. But even the pronounced shifts these switches enable still dovetail with the basic voice. The bias switch is the most variable and the most interactive with the other controls. At high-gain settings, the bias switch can make smooth fuzz sounds spittier. In more bass-heavy, treble-cut settings it can emphasize the low-octave content. And it can enhance sustain and add low-end ballast in treble-heavy, high-gain settings.

The germanium transistors mean you can dial back output to a near-clean signal with guitar volume attenuation. The filthy-to-clean attenuation curve is not gentle, though. You often have to use most of the guitar's volume's range to get clean tones, which live precariously close to cutting your signal entirely.

The Verdict

As well-tuned and even agreeable as the Black Drone Wasp is, it won't float everyone's boat. It's bold, sometimes bossy, and very loud. But it is quite colorful within its extroverted range. And if you can't get out in front of a band with this much extra gain, you probably need an extra 200 watts worth of amplifier. The price for all this buzz and brawn is considerable. But the $259 bucks buys you a handcrafted, carefully wired, unique, and thoughtfully designed, small-batch specimen with a big and distinct personality.

RATINGS

Tones	
Ease of Use	
Build/Design	
Value	

PROS Uniquely evil, brawny, smooth, and robust fuzz voice.

CONS Expensive.

$259 street

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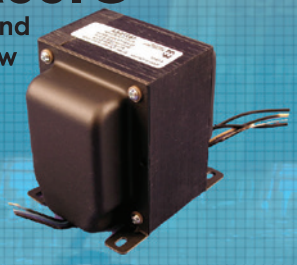

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3 LEAF AUDIO Chromatron

By Joe Gore

HEAR A DEMO NOW.

Reviewing a full-featured envelope filter like 3 Leaf's Chromatron can feel like evaluating two different products. One of them is quite cool, and the other is *ridiculously* cool.

Used on its own, the Chromatron is a fine-sounding filter box in the Mu-Tron III or Electro-Harmonix Q-Tron vein, with excellent renditions of the familiar '70s-style wah and quack effects. But when you insert other stompboxes into the Chromatron's effects loop, control the filter cut off with an expression pedal, or overdrive the pedal with upstream distortion, the Chromatron becomes a freaky, ferocious noise bomb.

Inside the Box

Yes, the Chromatron is most potent when you populate all five of its rear-panel jacks. But let's start with what the pedal does with only input and output cables connected.

Five knobs and four toggle switches provide a wealth of filter options. The response (sensitivity) and resonance (feedback) controls are similar to those on most envelope filters. One toggle selects between upward and downward sweeps. Another chooses low-pass or band-pass filtering. (The former is your classic funky filter effect, which retains low frequencies, while the latter filters out frequencies above and below the cut-off frequency for wah-type sounds.) A third toggle provides two filter bandwidth settings.

Offbeat Options

The remaining controls are more unusual. The envelope's response is determined solely by a sensitivity knob, or maybe an attack time control, on many envelope filters. But the Chromatron has independent attack and decay knobs, which permit slow-rise effects, bubbly percolation, and slow, synth-like sweeps.

Meanwhile, an independent tone control determines the upper limit of filter sweeps. It's handy for fine-tuning tones after you've dialed in the ideal resonance, attack, and decay settings. There's a wet-dry blend, which can soften the intensity of extreme filtering effects, or add low-end mass to strangled band-passed tones. Finally, there's a post-filter boost stage. Depending on the Chromatron's resonance and bandwidth settings, the output level can vary greatly. This added control levels the playing field while specifying how hard the Chromatron drives your amp and any downstream effects.

Expressionist Art

The first demo (**Clip 1**) showcases the Chromatron with only a guitar and amp connected. The second demo (**Clip 2**) shows what happens when you connect an expression pedal (not included) to control the cut-off frequency.

An expression pedal transforms the Chromatron into a superpowered wah. Bandpass mode with a 100 percent wet mix setting delivers classic Hendrix/Clapton flavors. In low-pass mode, you can get everything from near-subliminal sweeps to shrieking feedback, depending on your resonance and mix settings. (The Chromatron

has no high-pass setting.) The range and mix controls provide further variation.

The Fuzzier, the Merrier

For the third audio clip, I added a couple of homemade stompboxes: a germanium booster in front of the Chromatron and a gnarly fuzz in the pedal's effect loop. Some passages feature just Chromatron and fuzz. Others add the upstream distortion, and a few include expression control. **Clip 3** is twice as long as the other two because I was having twice as much fun recording it.

Survey the wreckage! Adding fuzz unleashes a menagerie of wild sounds. Tones can howl, cry, grunt, gargle, or hock loogies. Modest adjustments to filter and fuzz settings can yield huge tonal changes. You can fiddle for hours, concocting one vicious tone after another. Sounds can get seriously extreme, though you can always soften their impact via the mix control. This configuration is especially useful for overdubs and doubles—you can choose just the right emphasis to suit a mix. It's so much fun that it's probably illegal in a dozen states.

The Chromatron, which runs on standard 9V power supplies (there's no battery compartment), is handbuilt in the U.S. using top-shelf parts. The circuit board features a mix of surface-mount and through-hole parts. The hardware's nice. The machined aluminum case has cool beveled edges. The soft-touch relay footswitches feel great. The knobs are metal, although the jacks are plastic. All hardware is board-mounted.

The Verdict

The Chromatron's mix of standard and unconventional controls provides an extraordinary assortment of envelope filter sounds. The pedal sounds excellent on its own, and amazing when you exploit its effects loop and expression control. At $349, the Chromatron is pricy, but most lower-priced options can't match its range. One possible exception is EHX's Riddle, which also includes expression control and an effects loop and sells for about $200. But that's a mass-produced pedal, not a handbuilt boutique model. Price notwithstanding, the Chromatron is one of today's most versatile, expressive, and outrageously fun filter effects.

RATINGS

Tones	
Ease of Use	
Build/Design	
Value	

PROS Vast array of cool envelope filter effects. Expression control. Effects loop. Quality build.

CONS The response pot's taper feels lopsided. A bit pricey.

$349 street

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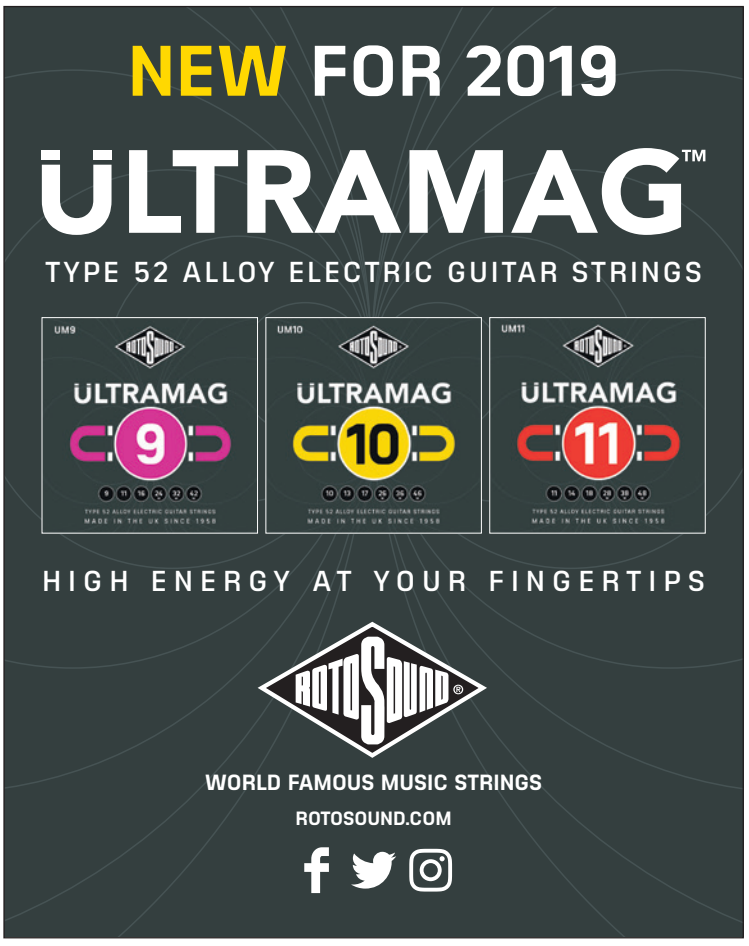

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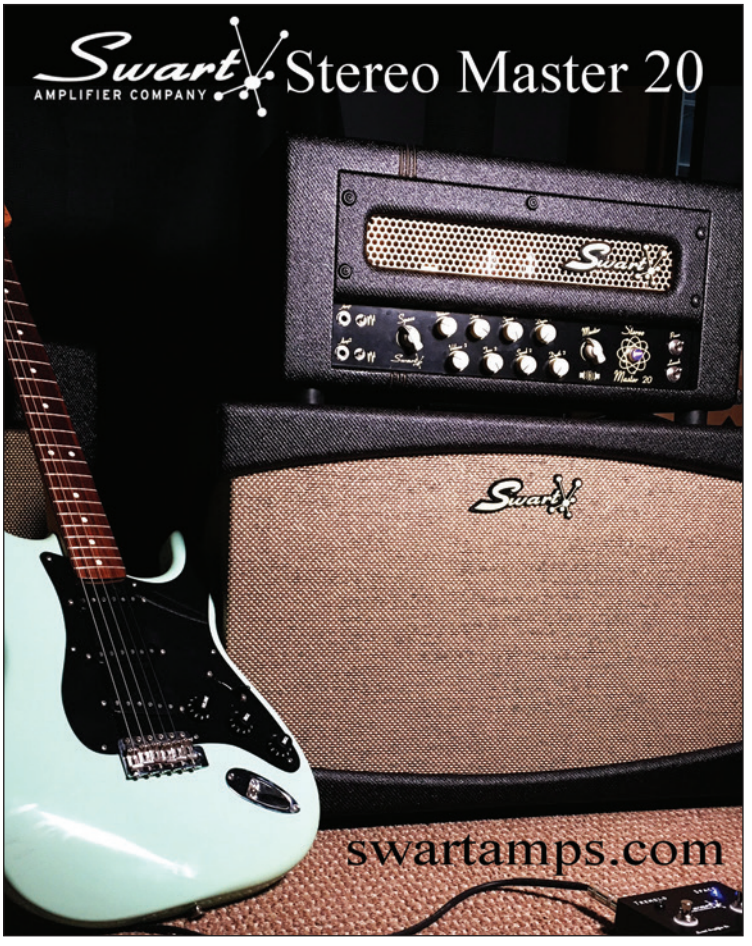


AGUILAR
Tone Hammer 700

By Victor Brodén

WATCH THE REVIEW DEMO NOW.

Aguilar Amplification first joined the class-D revolution in 2011 by combining the preamp from their popular Tone Hammer pedal with a class-D power amp section for their Tone Hammer 500 head. And while today's bass-amplification market is no doubt flush with lightweight, class-D-powered amps at fairly affordable price points, the Tone Hammer series has remained a staple for many bassists in widely different applications. The company's newest class-D entry, the Tone Hammer 700, provides all the features a number of players have come to know and love, but Aguilar also added more of the feature that so many bassists know and love the most: power.

Familiar Face

The first thing that caught my attention after pulling the Tone Hammer 700 out of its shipping box was how incredibly light it is. At just shy of five pounds, the 700 is noticeably lighter than many others in its class. I might sound like an old guy here, but it's still astounding to me that 700 watts can actually weigh less than a big, hardcover book.

Those already familiar with the Tone Hammer 500 will recognize the front plate—where the gain and drive controls, 3-band EQ, midrange-frequency selector, effect send/return, and DI out are placed in their tried-and-true positions. Around back, the rear panel is a simple affair with two Speakon speaker outputs, a tuner output, and the mains on/off switch located right above the power-cable connection.

Straight to Work

On the day the Tone Hammer 700 arrived at my house, I was booked to play a 1,000-capacity club here in Southern California. Along with my 20-year-old Sadowsky Vintage 5, I brought the Aguilar to run the Ampeg 8x10 house cabinet.

My first impression was how distinct the sound of the Tone Hammer is. The amp has a fingerprint that's hard to miss when the EQ section is left untouched, and that fingerprint comes with a lot of mids. With the drive circuit barely engaged, at 9 o'clock, the feeling of tube simulation was instantly present, and I felt like the amp made for a good pairing with the large cabinet. With its 700 watts, I had no problem

getting a commanding stage volume with the master volume set to 10 o'clock.

As a fairly aggressive player who keeps his electronics in passive mode about 90 percent of the time, I found myself cutting quite a bit of the mids and boosting the highs slightly to help make the bass clear and keep it from honking too much. I enjoyed the Tone Hammer's definition with this setup, especially when playing fingerstyle. My tone never got too muddy, it provided plenty of attitude, and the amp's slight tube simulation made slides with fret noises sound musical.

Back in my home studio, I put the Tone Hammer 700's onboard DI through its paces with a 1983 Yamaha BB1600, which is like a slightly angrier Precision bass. I used a pick, which can present challenges when not miking a cab, but not in this case. In order to really feel the aforementioned tube-simulation effect, I turned up the drive control to 12 o'clock, which provided me with a thicker, slower attack. I'd say it sounded somewhere between a miked SVT and a solid-state DI box.

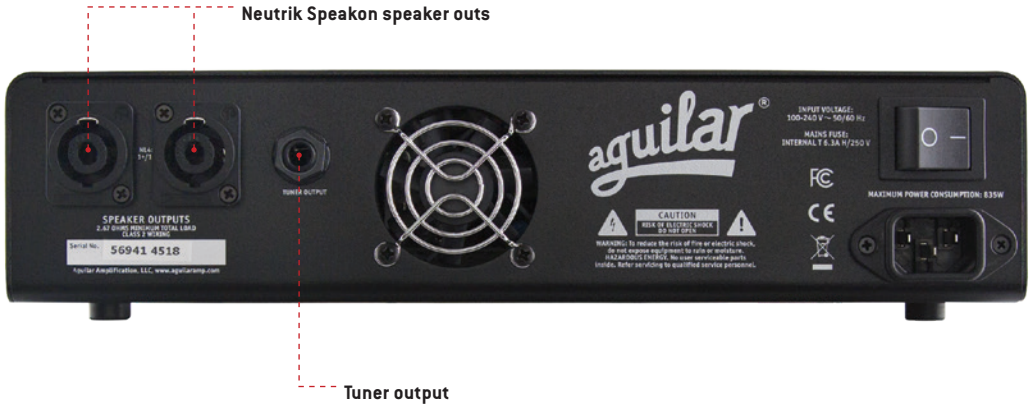
When turning the drive knob further past noon, the tone became darker and more overdriven. I did find a sweet spot with the control, however, and was able to successfully warm this tone up without causing it to lose its clarity. To my ears, the drive function really seemed to shine brighter using the built-in DI compared to the 8x10—a cab that already provides some of the same benefits as the drive section thanks to its inherent voicing and slight speaker distortion.

Next, I paired the Tone Hammer 700 with a compact-sized 15" Mesa Boogie Subway, which is a very differently voiced cabinet. For this scenario, I played the amp at a quieter volume and used my Sandberg TM5 in active mode. Compared to passive basses, most 2-band active basses naturally have a scooped sound. Because of this, I think the Tone Hammer 700's strong midrange matches up with active basses quite well, as it can help their sometimes-large sonic footprint become more manageable in the greater scheme of a live band or mix. Naturally, I left the EQ flat and turned the drive control back to zero, and despite using a modern-sounding bass, the sound was still warm and the highs from the active electronics were not overly bright. This setup proved to be very flexible since I was easily able to switch between slap and fingerstyle playing while retaining a balanced tone and volume.

I would have liked some sort of a one-stop-shopping EQ control, similar to what other manufacturers call an enhance, character, or voicing control. I typically rely heavily on a control like this to compensate for instrument changes between songs or to change tone without having to take the time to re-EQ the amp. To be fair, the drive control on the Tone Hammer can do a little bit of that trick, but it obviously can come with a fair amount of grit.

Verdict

The Tone Hammer 700 shows why so many players have for years considered the Tone Hammer series a standard in class-D amplification. This new amp provides the same features without messing with a time-tested, successful formula. There are gigs where 700 watts will serve better than 500 watts, so there's definitely a place for this amp in the marketplace in spite of the slightly higher price tag. To be able to *convincingly* handle a true rock gig with a tubeless amp under 5 pounds, and with stage volume louder than most people would ever need? To me, that's a glorious thing.



RATINGS

Tones	
Ease of Use	
Build/Design	
Value	

PROS Highly useable drive function. Lightweight. Versatile tones.

CONS Lacks an all-in-one EQ/tone knob. Could use a headphone out. A bigger and easier-to-spot mute button would be nice.

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QUESTION & OBSESSION

***Q:** If you could ask one musician one question, who would it be and what would you ask?*

DANDY WARHOLS

PETER HOLMSTRÖM

A: At the moment, I'm very interested in bass tones and I'm dying to know how "Fascination Street" by the Cure happened. So I would have to ask Simon Gallup what bass, what amp, and what effects were used.

CURRENT OBSESSION:

My current obsession is *XTRMNTR* by Primal Scream. I've come back around to it. Stylistically and thematically, it fits these times. I love the aggressive drive, how heavy it is without being "heavy," and how it's hard to distinguish between guitar and synths.

Left: Photo by Clemens Mitscher

READER OF THE MONTH

Mark Scala

A: I had this opportunity in 2004, when I asked Steve Howe how he developed his fingerpicking style. He said, "My style is a result of my failed attempt to copy Chet Atkins." I met Steve through a mutual friend, Annie Haslam of Renaissance, in his dressing room after their Philly Spectrum show on the Yes 35th Anniversary Tour. I was very aware that his beloved '64 ES-175D was in its case just a few feet away.

CURRENT OBSESSION:

Even after 40-plus years of playing guitar, I'm passionate about improving my technique and understanding more complex theory. I dove headlong into the transition from tube amplification to digital modeling, and I've enjoyed the flexibility and consistency it's afforded me, especially in live performance.

PHOTO EDITOR

Kristen Berry

A: Portishead, collectively, on why it takes so long to come out with a new record. It's like they have lives or something.

CURRENT OBSESSION:

I've been reading quite a few music-related books recently, namely *Burning Down the Haus*, which is about the underground East German punk scene and their fight against authoritarianism before the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. Also, *Complicated Fun: The Birth of Minneapolis Punk and Indie Rock 1974-1984*, which has me listening to the Suicide Commandos' *Make a Record* on repeat.

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Jason Shadrick

A: I want to ask Trey Anastasio about his songwriting process. I've been listening to Tom Marshall's podcast (he's Trey's writing partner) and it fascinates me how much humor and heart they put into their music. They seem to work so well together that there has to be some creative inspiration to be gleaned from their process.

CURRENT OBSESSION:

I've heard many successful musicians give a piece of advice that has recently connected with me. Basically, always say "yes" to a gig and then figure out how to do it. I was asked to play a rather difficult modern chamber piece that involves shifting time signatures, difficult positions, unusual keys, and lots of open space. It's already made me a better musician.

Top left: Photo by Kathy Scala **Top right:** Photo by SolarScott

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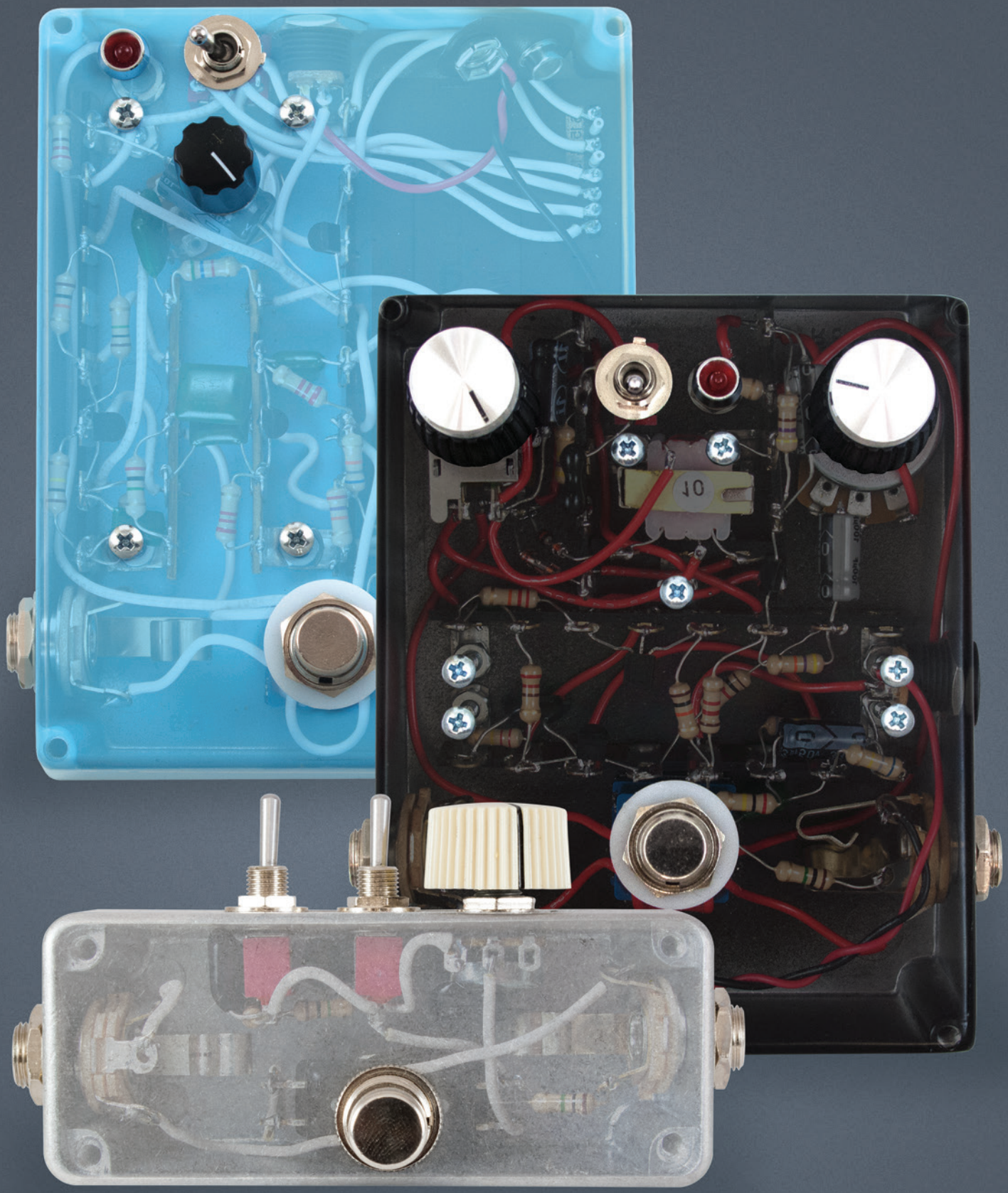

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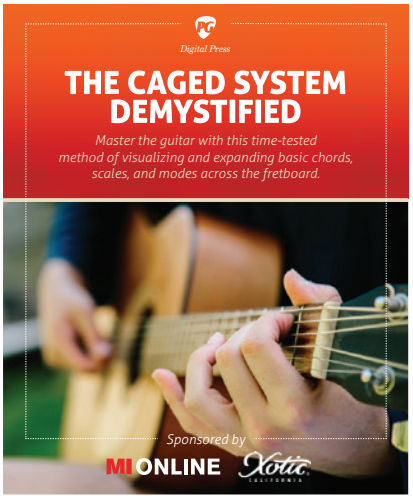

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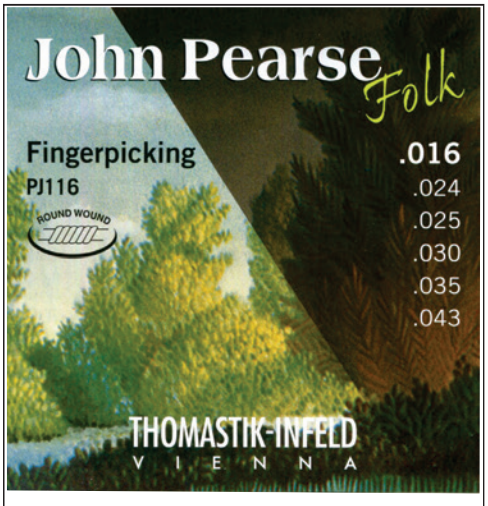

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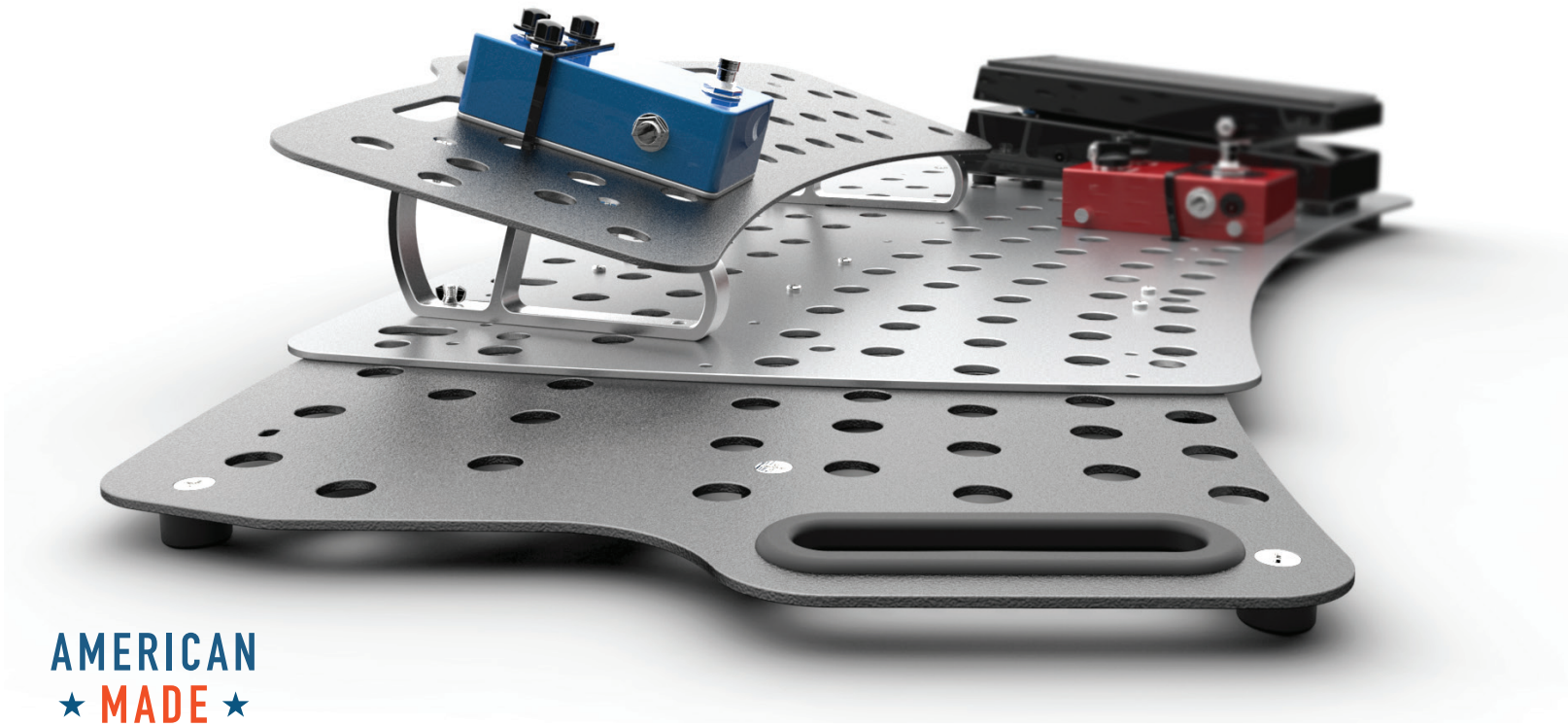

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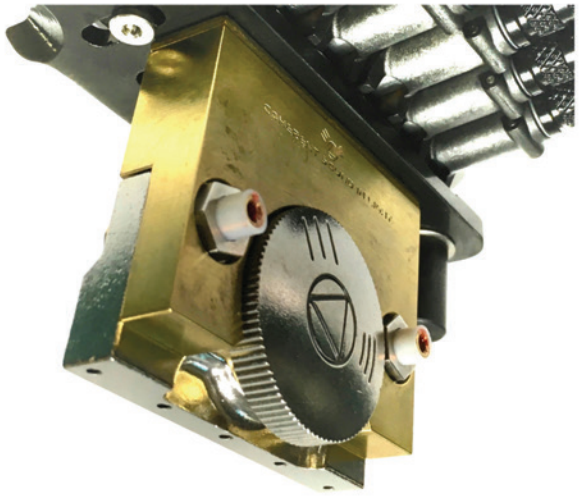

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The Guitarist's Pocket Glossary

BY JOL DANTZIG

JOL DANTZIG *is a noted designer, builder, and player who co-founded Hamer Guitars, one of the first boutique guitar brands, in 1973. Today, as the director of Dantzig Guitar Design, he continues to help define the art of custom guitar. To learn more, visit guitardesigner.com.*

The new Jazzglider by Retrophobe features a vintage-inspired modern mix of handbuilt features, including high-definition handwound Holobucker single-coils that deliver ultra-wide, flat-frequency response and punchy mids, while attenuating 60-cycle interference with boosted bass.

The NAMM show always proves to be a dazzling display, with each purveyor vying for your attention with bright colors and descriptive bait. But what is new? Musicians want great tools to make music, but sometimes wading through the terminology used to describe equipment can get a little—how shall I say this—*opaque*. As a veteran with over four decades of building, repairing, designing, and breaking musical instruments, I've heard quite a few slang terms and have used them liberally for fun and profit. So, in the interest of saving you a lot of handwringing over the jargon employed by manufacturers and small builders, I present my layman's glossary of gear-manufacturing phraseology.

'59: We use this to tip you off that we "get" that vintage thing that you people like.

Amplitude tapering: Some 1950s technology that is common knowledge, but sounds impressive to musicians who don't do homework.

Backorder list: Number of customers in line waiting for us to learn how to do what they want.

Blended nitro lacquer: If we ding it in the shop, it will be easy to repair, and if it cracks, we don't have to warranty it.

Cold checking: Those little crack lines in the nitro finish on a $250,000 Les Paul Standard made in 1959.

Extended flat response, with punchy mids: So … it's not really flat, is it?

Fast neck: Sanded by a new employee.

Game changer: Something that's been done to death, but *ours* connects to your phone.

Handbuffed: The employee holds the guitars against the 7 HP buffing machine.

Handbuilt: We can't fit/afford a CNC machine in our shop yet.

Handmade: Someone used a hand tool on this somewhere in the workflow.

Handselected: Selected using someone's hands, and, hopefully, eyes.

Handwound: We're just testing the market now before throwing down money for an expensive winding machine.

High-tech: If it malfunctions, you'll have to send it to us to get fixed.

Limited edition: Unlikely to sell in big enough numbers to be integrated into the product line as a regular item.

Offset: If we didn't offer a Jazzmaster copy, we'd go belly up in a few months.

PAF: Patent Applied For. This is a humbucking pickup that everyone wants and very few have actually heard.

Plexi tone: Tone that sounds awesome on the 1/2" speaker in your phone.

Preloaded: This sort of effects unit will work as soon as you plug it in.

Premium frets: Better than non-premium frets.

Rare: Expensive and difficult to obtain, therefore not in stock.

Real world: Our marketing people spent two hours on internet gear forums, and then asked some teenagers what they thought.

Relic: Oooops. I guess we can charge more for this now.

Serious sustain: The copywriter really wanted to say, "Sustain as long as a day without breakfast," but he was afraid he'd have to move to Idaho and shoot himself in the head.

Tap tone: We listen to the wood we use on our acoustic guitar before we make the guitar. It's like smelling cheese before you make the pizza.

Tribute: We copied it almost exactly, except for our stupid headstock.

Upgrade: Profit center.

Vintage inspired: We can't say Les Paul, Telecaster, Gibson, Fender, or Marshall, but you get it, right?

Wood library: You can check out any time you like, but you'll never be overdue.

As you might imagine, there's an endless supply of industry nomenclature to translate, and I'm sure I missed quite a few. You can add your favorites in the comments section online, so I'll have a fresh supply when updating my website text. Thank you all in advance.

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Musician, Heal Thyself

BY JOHN BOHLINGER

JOHN BOHLINGER *is a Nashville-based multi-instrumentalist who, when not appearing in* PG *Rig Rundown and Review Demo videos, is best known for leading the band on NBC's* Nashville Star *and serving as music director for the* CMT Music Awards *and specials on PBS and GAC. He is also music director for USA Network's* Real Country *program.*

The therapists are in: from left to right, John Bohlinger, Tera Lynne Fister, Al Wilson, and Christopher Halson Griffiths at their office, the Music City Bar.

Here's an observation from Nick Hornby, in his book *High Fidelity*: "What came first, the music or the misery? Did I listen to music because I was miserable? Or was I miserable because I listened to music? Do all those records turn you into a melancholy person? People worry about kids playing with guns, and teenagers watching violent videos. Nobody worries about kids listening to thousands—literally thousands—of songs about broken hearts and pain and misery and loss. The unhappiest people I know, romantically speaking, are the ones who like pop music the most. And I don't know whether pop music has caused this unhappiness, but I do know that they've been listening to the sad songs longer than they've been living the unhappy lives."

More than 20 years later, this chicken/egg, depression/music timeline is getting some attention in the medical field. A 2016 academic study titled "Can Music Make You Sick?," by University of Westminster researchers Sally-Anne Gross and Dr. George Musgrave, found that musicians are three times more likely to experience depression than civilians. The study suggested that musicians were more likely to experience depression because of money worries, poor work conditions combined with social challenges, etc., but it mistakes correlation for causation.

Sure, a career in music is going to have some frustrating, humiliating, soul crushing, depressing elements, but many jobs do. That's why you get paid to work. I can't imagine what a person feels like four hours into an eight-hour shift in customer service, but that's got to be far more brutal than playing music under almost any conditions. The reason 69 percent of musicians interviewed in this study have issues with depression probably has more to do with their wiring than their work.

Maybe we are drawn to music because we have some chemical or emotional glitches that make us crave solace? We turn to music as therapy because music makes us feel better, like the way depressed people may use drugs or alcohol.

A 2018 study by the Music Industry Research Association (MIRA), in partnership with the Princeton University Survey Research Center and MusiCares, confirmed that musicians not only have a higher rate of depression and suicidal thoughts; they are also four times more likely to use illegal drugs than the average American.

People in pain are looking for a fix. Some choose Prozac, some choose booze and/or drugs, some choose music—and some prefer a blend of all of the above. As Rami Malek, acting as Freddie Mercury in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, said while standing in front of a big pile of cocaine: "Being human is a condition that requires a little anesthesia."

A 2017 study by McGill University in Montreal showed that the human brain's own opioids are directly involved in musical enjoyment. In short, the study stated, "the same chemicals in the brain that provide pleasure when people have sex or take drugs are also involved in the pleasure that comes from listening to music.

"Preliminary studies have shown that music listening and performing modulate levels of serotonin, epinephrine, dopamine, oxytocin, and prolactin. Music can reliably induce feelings of pleasure and, indeed, people consistently rank music as among the top 10 things in their lives that bring pleasure, above money, food and art."

Music has been helping people cope since our caveperson ancestors began banging out tunes on the skulls of their rivals. Aristotle and Plato talked about the healing power of music. Some friends and I do a semi-regular gig at the Music City Bar, an authentic Nashville, old-school honky-tonk out by the Opry, where people smoke inside and everything on the menu is deep-fried, delicious, and deadly. This atmosphere is perfect for crying pedal-steel guitars and sad songs. So, we spend four hours straight playing tunes so depressing they'd bring a tear to a glass eye. It's our therapy, and the audience's as well.

I've got my shit I'm dealing with, and I can only assume my bandmates and the bar patrons have theirs as well. But we don't talk about it; we just play. I've spent a lot of time talking to psychiatrists and psychologists, but they've never made me feel better than playing "That's the Way Love Goes" with my friends in a dank, smoke-filled room.

What came first, the music or the misery? Misery came first. Music is the medicine. Luckily, of all the medications I can think of, music has the fewest adverse side effects. (Warning: Side effects of playing music may include gear addiction, divorce, loss of sleep, poverty, and hearing loss).

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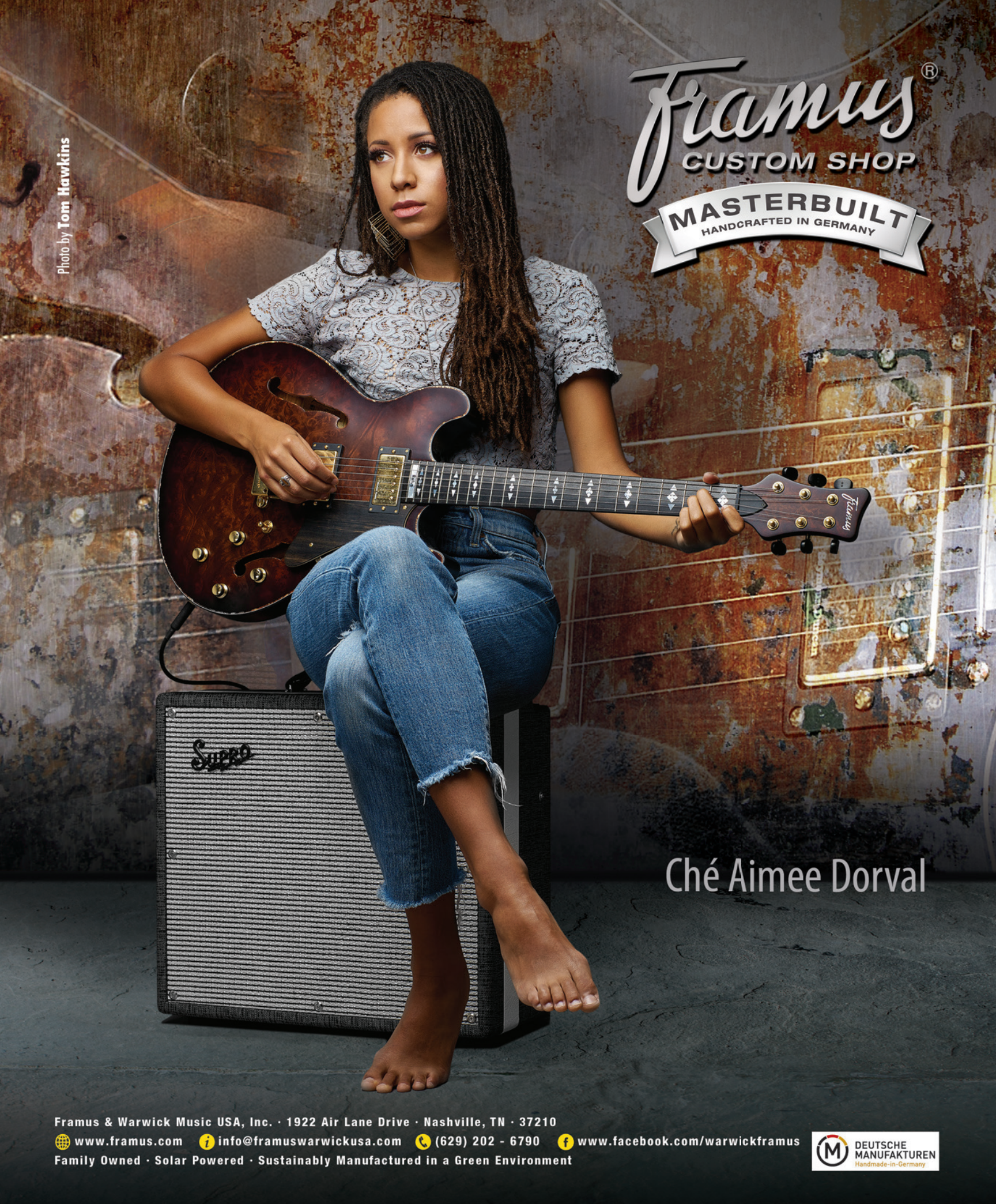
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